

## **Meeting Report: Riding the waves or treading water? Confronting the challenges of a volatile electronic environment**

**Fiona McLean**

This meeting took place at the UKeiG Annual General Meeting on 13 June 2007 at SOAS, London. The chairman for the day was Gary Horrocks (UKeiG Chair).

### **1. Introduction by Gary Horrocks, UKeiG Chair**

Gary's introduction included some key points that which were demonstrated by the later sessions. He described what our role and responsibility are in this volatile electronic environment. There are three converging issues

The first is that new technology needs to be assessed rationally and logically for its possible place in the workflow that helps the organisation to fulfil its mission and business plan. It is our responsibility to monitor for new technology, and keep senior management informed. It is up to them whether they decide to go for it or not.

We need to keep up with the rapidly evolving new technologies. Web 2.0 applications and their huge take-up by users have had a particularly powerful effect, and things are changing rapidly. Web 2.0 applications use more interactive approaches. Some are currently in use on the level of gaming or other non-work content. We need to feel confident about including time for this in our schedules, and acknowledge that the main use of the applications may not be work-related content.

The second issue is that our users are already using this technology. Younger ones, such as in HE, will be 'digital natives' who take it for granted, whereas it will be something new beyond past experience for others, who are 'digital immigrants'. 'Digital natives' will do whatever they find useful in new applications – we need to learn about it, assess its functionality. If adopted, we then need to be able to teach and support this new application.

The third issue is that we must also manage our careers: no-one else will! We need to keep notes of activities/skills so that we maintain a current, comprehensive CV. And be positive! Jobs in the electronic sector are growing, and the inclusion of strap lines by organisations that acknowledge the importance of information shows a new acceptance.

The next two talks were by Dr Jan-Martin Lowendahl, Research Director, Gartner (<http://www.gartner.com>) His work is based in their Higher Education Team, but his talks had a more general relevance.

### **2. Emerging IT trends and tools to deal with hype, maturity and alignment.**

Jan-Martin described the key issues to address as: what IT trends will affect (higher education) organisations; what services will the internal IT organisations need to develop/discontinue, and what tools can be used to frame the discussion on IT (in a university)?

His talk described the challenge of rapidly changing and increasing use of technologies, and how they have changed the teacher/student role, and enabled new communities.

Jan-Martin stressed that the role of IT is to facilitate and support the aims of the organisation's mission and operational plan, and not a separate function. Specialist staff have the responsibility for accurate and timely briefings, but it is not their role to make decisions: that is the responsibility of the leaders of the organisation. IT staff need to develop a well-planned process to investigate the potential and relevance of new technological possibilities. He gave an example of a model with several clear steps. The needs of the end-users were a fundamental part of this assessment and planning process.

The importance of using data was stressed, whether from internal or external sources; many of the statistics in use are only estimates. One source he uses is the Horizon report<sup>1</sup>. The technology only provides the infrastructure. He gave the example of the many innovative uses of the 3D virtual world 'Second Life'<sup>2</sup>. It is entirely built by its millions of 'residents'. Gartner even uses it for their staff (as their avatars) to hold meetings. Another example is a collaborative project to build a mosque.

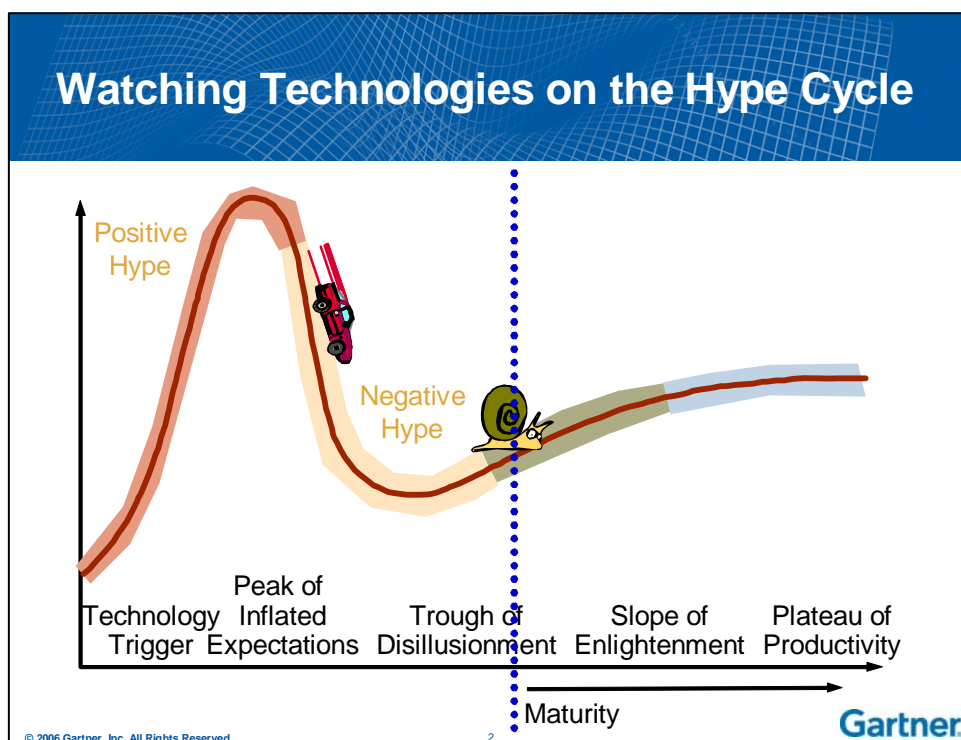


Figure 2 Emergent technology cycle

<sup>1</sup> **2007 Horizon Report.** The New Media Consortium & the EDUCAUSE Learning initiative. Posted February 15<sup>th</sup> 2007. Download from <http://www.nmc.org/horizon/2007/report> (viewed 26/06/2007)

<sup>2</sup> **Second Life** <http://secondlife.com/> (high speed connection needed). Requires registration before entering the site. Outside the site: user-developed videos e.g. Orientation Island 1: Moving and Flying <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZF77qx0BqmY> (viewed 26/06/2007).

**HealthInfo Island: 2nd life library** describes the project [http://infoisland.org/health\\_info](http://infoisland.org/health_info) (viewed 26/06/2007)

He presented a graph showing the 'Emerging Technologies Hype Cycle, 2005', which represents the fluctuations of hype when a new technology emerges. This starts in a huge wave of hype, followed by a fall as the problems with it become clear. However, there is then a gradual rise again as the realistic potential of the technology is recognised; then it becomes an ordinary tool to support productivity. He explained that most technologies will take several years to reach that stage, and many will not get there at all.

The talk concluded with his recommendations that IT staff need to support the main missions, build a framework to support decision-making, understand relevant standards, and always remember that IT is a tool.

### **3. Digital natives hit the workplace: fodder for digital culture wars?**

His second talk focussed on how there is now a 'digital culture war'. This model defines two groups: younger people take the digital world for granted: 'digital natives'. Others are 'digital immigrants' whose model of transferring information is based on pre-digital concepts<sup>1</sup>.

Applying this to the HE context, he described how the students are likely to be 'digital natives', and teachers and others 'digital immigrants'. Students preferring information to be delivered rapidly, randomly accessed via multimedia information, and to be instantly gratifying and useful. All these contrast with most teachers being 'digital immigrants' with opposite preferences. An example he gave was that a 'digital immigrant' would have talked about a 'digital camera', whereas a 'digital native' would always have just called it a camera. Workplace culture was likely to change as the 'digital immigrants' gradually retire.

The following two sessions looked at issues for information professionals themselves.

### **4. Information professionals: swimming upstream, or going with the flow**

This stirring presentation from Sue Hill, Managing Director of Sue Hill Recruitment (<http://www.suehill.com/>) stressed the importance of information professionals taking active control of their careers and development. Sue stressed that continuous learning, particularly of specific skills, is essential. We need to acquire the skills (and identify those we have already), then to 'document it – prove it – keep the CV career ladder up-to-date.' They skills can be job related, such as practical skills, and more general soft skills (e.g. communication). It's essential to adapt our skill set to meet changes. We also need to keep up with topics such as professional issues, the rapid technological innovations, and changes in user behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Jukes and Anita Dosaj, The InfoSavvy Group (Feb 2003). Source: website currently being rebuilt <http://web.mac.com/iajukes/iWeb/thecommittedsardine/Home.html> (viewed 26/06/2007)

Sue moved on to describe how we must have an understanding of what employers want. This is likely to include expecting staff to know the issues relevant to their job, employer and profession, in addition to the necessary skills. Leaders rely on the professional to use their expertise to keep up with the latest innovations, and advise them on ones relevant to the organisation's needs, even if the managers do not decide to take them up.

We need to have a high profile to market ourselves, for example put our successes 'up in lights'. Sue said that this linked with the importance of knowing what is going on, inside the organisation and outside, and to network in a calculating way, targeting important people. Then it's up to us to create a career plan, with an accurate insight into what employers can offer as well as what they want, in addition to an awareness of the job market. We need to identify things that motivate us, and seek evidence that an employer (of choice) can offer them.

Sue concluded by listing the visible signs of the consummate professional: a successful career with good moves, working with their employer of choice.

## 5. Who is managing information?

Val Skelton, head of training and learning, TFPL Ltd (<http://www.tfpl.com/>), described how information work skills have – and have not – changed in the last 20 years. She used examples from TFPL's training courses 20 years ago: the use of microfilm may be outdated, but records management continues to be a key skill. Most of the talk was based on the TFPL research project 'Who's managing information? Information responsibilities in the digital world.'<sup>1</sup> which is available to download free. The definition they used for e-information roles was any role of which at least 50% of time is spent in information or knowledge management. This includes a very wide range of roles and job titles, and these do reflect real developments. They are new representations of a traditional role. Val described two examples of specific projects, and finished her presentation with examples of 'real jobs' from their books.

## 6. Information literacy in the age of amateurs

The last presentation of the day was by Peter Godwin, Academic Liaison Librarian, University of Bedfordshire. Peter told us how HE is facing a wide range of projects and culture, and also the rapid changes in technologies and consequent changes in student behaviour. Information professionals need to decide how to react. In his talk, he described information literacy in the context of HIM, and then discussed the 'Web generation'. This included a review of Web 2.0 tools and what they mean for information professionals in HE and their effects on what and how they teach.

HE is also facing rapid changes in technologies and consequent changes in student behaviour. Information professionals need to decide how to react. CILIP provides this definition: "Information literacy is knowing when and why you need information, where to

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<sup>1</sup> Who's managing information? Information responsibilities in the digital world. TFPL Feb 2006. Free from TFPL website (registration required) Downloads page: [http://www.tfpl.com/form/report\\_dl.cfm?ct=t](http://www.tfpl.com/form/report_dl.cfm?ct=t) (viewed 26/06/2007)

find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner"<sup>1</sup>. There have also been projects such as SCONUL's '7 pillars' framework<sup>2</sup>.

We can become 'information gurus' with a wider knowledge of high quality resources (e.g. Google Print), and teach users about quality evaluation of resources. We can also recommend other search engines to Google, such as Exalead ([www.exalead.co.uk/](http://www.exalead.co.uk/)), CrossEngine ([www.crossengine.com/](http://www.crossengine.com/)) and Quitura ([www.quintura.com/](http://www.quintura.com/)).

Peter then focussed on Web 2.0 tools, and their implications. They have led to much more interaction between people and groups. He gave examples of some major tools, which are all Web applications designed for anyone to add, edit, store and share information. Innovative uses have flourished, particularly interactivity and development of communities, and they are now heavily used sites:

- Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)) online encyclopaedia
- MySpace (<http://www.myspace.com/>) social networking website offering interactive information in many formats
- YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/>) online video streaming service
- Del.icio.us (<http://del.icio.us/>) sharing bookmarks ('favourites')
- Library Thing (<http://www.librarything.com/>) details of books
- Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com/>) a photo sharing website

Peter noted how one feature of such sites is the need for users tag their resources with their own choice of words. This is central to the linking of ideas, and is part of critical thinking to make links that involve evaluation, categorising and formulating keywords. He pointed out how this could also develop an understanding of subject headings and summarising a topic. There are more Web applications, and rapid development will continue. There is a risk of information overload, such as in checking several RSS feeds and blogs (which can be a distraction as well as a valuable resource).

Peter described the Web 2.0 challenge to information literacy. The needs of the 'Google generation', and these tools, means that information literacy is increasingly needed; it is not a 'given'. Information professionals need to trial these tools to help us connect with that generation, as well as investigating how they could be useful in our work (for example, storing presentations or developing YouTube presentations for tutorials) We must spend more time: teaching how information is created and communicated, help to develop a sense of context, encourage scepticism and ability to evaluate, guide toward assimilation, deep thinking and reflection, and stress the need for ethical use of material.

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<sup>1</sup> A short introduction to information literacy CILIP, 2004  
[www.cilip.org.uk/professionalguidance/informationliteracy/definition/introduction.htm](http://www.cilip.org.uk/professionalguidance/informationliteracy/definition/introduction.htm)  
(viewed 26/06/2007)

<sup>2</sup> The seven pillars of information literacy model. SCOUNL Updated October 2006  
[www.sconul.ac.uk/groups/information\\_literacy/sp/model.html](http://www.sconul.ac.uk/groups/information_literacy/sp/model.html) (viewed 26/06/2007)

Peter concluded that we can play a key role in creating information-literate citizens. We are ideally placed to investigate and use Web 2.0 tools to encourage reflective learning. And we have a whole new set of tools to enliven our delivery!

I found this seminar thought-provoking, useful and informative. It was also a bit daunting, as it emphasized the rapid changes in technologies and their uses, and therefore how essential it is to put time and effort into keeping up to date. It has raised my awareness and interest in technology issues, such as mainstream news now including mobile phone videos, and interactive features.

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