

JISC BSCct  
University of Glamorgan G BLOG Pam Voisey and Grace Long  
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S: Speaker

PV: Pam Voisey

GL: Grace Long

PV: I chose as my theme 'business incubation as a community of practice' because that's, in fact, what we already had. We did have, and we have had, we've been growing for ten years, a community of people who are all passionate about enterprise, it's their own businesses but it's about enterprise and it's about sharing knowledge, referrals, networking, all those commercial issues as well as the fact that they're part of the University sponsored business incubation, which has a physical location.

So the incubator, as we run it, is quite different to a lot of other incubators, it's not a sort of typical, what you would think of as a large building separated into little offices where people have a smaller rental; it's not like that at all. We started out ten years ago with the sole intention of removing the barriers to entrepreneurship for graduates. We knew that we had very entrepreneurial, highly skilled graduates and we wanted to keep that wealth creating talent in the South Wales Valleys where it was desperately needed. But at the time, you know, the cost of business level software, access to the Internet, it was prohibitive; it's changed now, completely. We have the same set up for an entirely different set of reasons. So it's all about removing the barriers, we have a big, open plan, professional office space, which is shared, people 'hot desk'. We don't offer anything that's much smarter or faster than they could have at home, but what we *do* have now, which has become much more important as the years have gone on, is the community; it's no longer about the technology and it's all about the community of practise, the community of entrepreneurs and the encouragement, the support, the body of knowledge that resides in those entrepreneurs, because as time went on, it became much more about entrepreneurs in the community, rather than graduates. So we started out as the graduate teleworking initiative, which is where GTI comes from. We built that brand, but as we widened it out to be

much more than new graduates, students, we didn't want to drop the brand so it was just GTI, just think of it as 'go faster businesses'. (Laughter).

So we have all of that expertise from people who have perhaps been made redundant, they've been Health and Safety managers, HR managers in some big organisation for 20 years, they've been made redundant or have taken early retirement because they are fed up, and they think, 'Well I'll become a consultant and I'll sell back my services to my old company at twice the old rate and I'll work half the time. What's wrong with that? It's great!'

But you've got then, that great body of knowledge in that person and we have people who have been in sales, so that knowledge may not necessarily be of the business they are going to be relevant to somebody else, but their life experience and skills are.

So that's really the community of practice that we've got, that really supportive environment.

So what we thought was, we've got this physical space and we keep talking about the virtual world and you don't actually have to be here, but how can we take it on online? How can we put GTI online? Now, we have a website but it's a page on the main University website. As much as I love IT and fiddling about on my computer, as my husband will tell you, I'm not up to managing to go into the, you know, back end content management system of the University's website and updating our website all the time; I just can't do it and don't have the time and patience to learn. So we thought, 'How can we do this differently?' and then the JISC project came along and we thought, 'Oh great! This is a way that we can use this blog now and create something that will help the GTI businesses to network online, to find out all sorts of information, we can bring the University academics in, because everybody that we talk to, and they come and visit and they all *love* it and think it's great and they want to be part of it, and close links with Rhondda Cynon Taff Business Club, and we thought, there are lots of businesses there; they look at the University on the hill, you know, as we are, these big white buildings on the side of the valley and think, 'Oh, I haven't got a Degree, I could be going there and they'd say 'Never darken my door again!'... But there is all

this knowledge in there that people are willing to share with them. So how can we do this? So we thought, right, G-Blog, that's just some of our businesses in the incubator and this person here, Mike Tan, straddled both; he is a lecturer and he's a highly skilled highways engineer, built motorways and all sorts of things, right across the globe, but he's also a GTI business because he runs a training consultancy and we've got all sorts of businesses and people.

This guy here, just in case you are wondering, I've blocked his face out deliberately, not by mistake, because he's not actually one of the businesses, he's a British Sign Language interpreter because we have a profoundly deaf person who is starting a business, and I'm getting used to this slight, you know, you have to space your conversation because he sits behind me or next to me and does the interpreting. So we learn such a lot about all sorts of things in GTI that we never thought we'd learn about. So that's some of our wonderful businesses, and this is Tim Long, who is Grace's husband, very helpful. He's one of our businesses too.

The guy in the middle is a stand-up comic, just done three weeks at the Edinburgh Fringe; that isn't his business. His business is called 'School of Life' and he goes into schools all over the country and delivers the PSHE curriculum through the medium of comedy, so he's talking to children about really serious things like self-discipline, relationships, and he calls it stuff like 'How to fight your self and win!' and 'How to handle your relationships less disastrously' and it's fantastic stuff and he's doing very well. So we do really do have a range of skills.

That is quite... I took this off the resource from the Communities of Practice stuff that we had from JISC. I took that off the stuff they sent me, and it really does, it's a very good model of GTI. I particularly liked the lurkers; we have got lurkers... But the core group, I suppose I'm the coordinator, the core group of course is ever changing, you get people coming in, people who are in process, people going out, and then the people that go out sometimes come back and they retain their links and they pay, you know, they want to give something back. And then we've got the occasional people, people that

just want to use this for a postal address, but we've got this big community and it's ever changing and it works really well. But the point is, how do you bring all of that stuff together? And you can't do it by a website, you just can't. So the blog was really good.

What we've done is, we've run events to publicise the blog, and one of the things that we'll talk about later is the fact that somewhere you have to anchor the virtual in the physical because you can't do it all virtually, so you have to do it physically, and we've got an example here... A typical event that Grace organised a couple of weeks ago, and we've been doing this all the way through the project with G-Blog, where we invite local businesses, academics, the lurkers, the occasionals, the core. And this is what it looks like... (*Video plays*).

Sorry about the shaky camera work, I'm not an expert. We're located in the heart of the South Wales Valleys and the reason, this is a 15th Century Inn called Llechwen Hall, there's our event, and as I panned round, I thought to myself, 'Wow! Look at this! We're on the top of the mountain, we've got the Rhymny Valley across there...' So that's the Rhymny Valley, and panning around now, there's the Brecon Beacons, the Merthyr Vale... Pan around to here and you're looking at the Dare Valley and the Rhondda, so we really are in the heart of the valleys. This is our merry group - Grace in charge ... Academics...

So that's just a one-minute video to give you a flavour of the sort of thing that we're doing. So we called G-Blog the 'listening zone' because we wanted to have this two-way thing where what was in it for the people that we were encouraging to get involved, because you're selling something all the time, aren't you?

This is G-Blog, we'd like you to get involved. My background is marketing / research / business-to-business stuff, so I'm always focused on what does the customer need? Customer satisfaction. If I'm asking somebody to do something, what is in it for them? Because all of us buy stuff on the basis of 'What do we get out of it?' and that's the only question you have to ask yourself, 'What does the customer get out of it?' and you have to follow along

with that. So I thought, 'Right, what do people get out of it?' If we're saying to the academics, 'We think this is something that you need to be involved in because you need to allow people to access your expertise and knowledge' so what's in it for them? Well, very often they need to be asking small businesses what is impacting on them, they need that knowledge of what's going on in the real world as well. It's no good them just doing research and thinking that the theory is the be all and end all, they need to be talking to small businesses all the time. So it's this two-way thing, we listen to them and they listen to us. And we wanted this very much *ad hoc* informal access that we could broker between any business in the community, and the University. So that was the theory, we thought, 'This is going to be great, we've really got something going here.' And just to give you a flavour of what it looks like... Hopefully this will work, it works on mine. There we are, G-Blog, the listening blog.' And so the partner was Rhondda Cynon Taff Business Club, we've got all this down here about who we are, how you join, the categories and all sorts of things. I haven't got time, but you can have the URL, it's quite simple it's <http://g-blog.glam.ac.uk> so you can have a look at it yourself.

So, going back to the presentation... Right, so how did we do, what happened? Well, we have always had a really good working relationship with the IT people, we used to be in their department and we used to work very hard to look after them because they worked very hard looking after us, keeping the IT going in the incubator. So you have this relationship with them and that was fine, and we worked with one of the senior designer people, Barry Richards, he came to one of the JISC things at the beginning, and he designed the logo and he recommended that we went with Wordpress and hosted it with Media Temple in the States because he'd found that it was very reliable. So that worked really well, Wordpress is Open Source, hosting was quite cheap, I think it's \$200 a year, it's been absolutely flawless, we've had no downtime at all.

One of the things that we hit early on was that every single person that we had negotiated the partnership within Rhondda Cynon Taff Business Club, changed, every single person. And so the links, the goodwill, the interest just

collapsed. We tried hard to resurrect it but Rhondda Cynon Taff Business Club is a function of someone in the Council that's got a million other things to do, and they really just, you know, it's just 'there'; not a lot happens. So that was as it was.

Then we went to the businesses, our own businesses, and the academics, we had a launch, we had a set up meeting, and it was really well received, it was fantastic, great. And the follow-up meetings went along as well... But in practice, there were 3 or 4 people who were posting blogs, there was not a lot of blogging. And that was so disappointing, and we went back to people and said, 'G-blog, G-blog, it's great...!' 'Yes, it's great' 'I'd love to hear what you were just telling me, on the blog' 'Yes, yeah, I'll post it on the blog'... 'Well, if you're finding difficulty logging on and doing it and you're not quite sure how it works, email Grace, she is the fount of all knowledge and wisdom when it comes to such things, she will tell you how to do it.' And Grace will tell you, in a minute, what she did.

But what we found that there was *so* much competition for people's time and attention that it didn't matter how much goodwill there was when you were talking to them, once you were out of sight, you were out of mind.

So the story actually is that it probably took people too much time that they didn't have, to think about doing it because it wasn't a place that they would naturally be, and there's a certain amount of blogging fatigue and, you know, apologies for the phrase, but I felt we were being told to 'blog off'... (laughter)... not specifically but implicitly, because it didn't happen. There's so many blogs that people can go on, Linked In, Facebook, Twitter, all of these things that they've got there already, their network is on it, and to suddenly put in something else that requires an effort, it's just 5 minutes too far.

In terms of the academics, I was warned about this, I have to say, by our team in Commercial Services Office who were trying to get them to work with businesses and do all of this, that academics are actually sometimes unwilling, most of the time, unable to get involved unless you put a humongous amount of time and nagging and activity into it, and I don't have that time, and you know, people who have got really good reasons for not

being able to do what you ask them. I kept saying to people, who seemed to spend their whole lives in Twitter, you know, 'I'm on the train to this' or 'I'm singing in this choir' 'I'm watching the rugby...' 'Okay, if you've got time to do that, can't you just go on G-Blog and post something about your research? Because it's really interesting!' 'No, I'm writing up my PhD for 6 months', was the answer there, or 'I'm teaching in Hungary for the next two weeks, sorry, I just can't do it' or 'I've got this Paris conference to attend' or, which has happened more in the past 6 months than before, 'I'm being made redundant.' The huge changes, particularly in the Business School, have had a great impact on all of this because people's time and attention has been completely diverted.

I did some research with the businesses, and what they told me is that they read the blog but they don't post on it. Fine, okay, I'm really glad to know that they read it. I wish they'd post, but if they read it then it's okay. And the mainstay of the blog has been Grace and her husband Tim, they run separate businesses in GTI, very technically capable, lots of information about what's coming out of Microsoft, what the next generation of anti-virus software is, and other things as well about astronomy, all sorts of things, the world of the virtual assistant, lots of resources, and people are reading this and really enjoying it and they are going off and talking to Tim about other things, and that's good, but I don't know that unless I keep asking.

Grace is going to tell us some of the things that she did to try and promote people to take part in this. Grace, do you want to tell us some of the things that you worked really hard to do?

GL: Good morning everybody! My name's Grace Long and I run separately, 'Live Assistant Business Solutions' which is a part of the GTI Incubation Centre. I am a virtual assistant, but I'm here physically. (Laughter). Anyway, what have I done to promote and encourage participation in G-Blog? Lots. I posted 'how to' articles there, short of teaching your grandmother how to suck eggs, you know like, 'But I don't know how to blog!' they said, 'I don't know what to blog about!' and you just sort of talk them through, 'What is it

in your business that seems to be interesting? Then blog about it, and that will hopefully encourage comments from other people who might be interested in the same interests you have.' But, you can do little 'how to' articles and then the issues of user names and passwords, I've issued it when they've expressed interest to participate, but, they got their user name and password but there's no blog coming up, or no comment at all, and I ask, again, 'Did you lose your user name and password? I'll gladly email it all back to you or you can set up your new password if you like' and they said, 'Okay!' The personalised emails to send them are all their user names and passwords, or sometimes I give them a phone call, 'What's going on?' and 'Have you forgotten about G-Blog then? Please, we need more of your participation.' And they said, 'Oh I'm too busy... I really don't know how to blog.' 'If you wish, I'd come to your office and help you' and they said, 'No, I don't have time!' And so those are the normal answers I get and then of course other, potential participants, I've also sent them special emails to say, 'Which user name would you like? Then I'll issue your passwords' and then they say, 'Don't have time...' So those are the things that we are up against with references to participation of other businesses.

The academics, I also tried talking to some of the academics but that's more of Pam's remit, but still, those that I know at least, in the areas that might be quite useful and some who attended some of our network events and I said to them, 'What you just said is going to be great for the blog! Can I get a copy of whatever it is you wish to blog and I'll post it?' 'Yeah, I'll send it to you...' That didn't happen either. (Laughter).

So there you go, that's a flavour of what I've come across.

PV: Thanks Grace. So as you can see, it's a bit of an uphill struggle, however, it's not all bad, I wouldn't want you to get the idea that it's all totally negative because, because we've been doing this, we have made links with academics that we wouldn't perhaps have discovered, so it's made us go out and talk to different people and we've run events and people have come and that's been fine. So what did we learn about this? Actually it takes longer to engage people than we thought and this is such a specific thing, it's such a niche

thing, that it's really hard to compete with Linked In and the groups that people are on. This is just something else that they have to do, so we have to think about changing this, offering more, we need to reconsider how we take this forward.

I've also learnt that academics are great at becoming completely invisible when they don't need you to send a student along to do some research on small businesses, you know, they are there and we're always very helpful and we always help them, but you know, they just disappear off the face of the Earth when you actually need them; some of them anyway.

The things that have been positive about it is, you know, we've reinforced our links with the IT team and actually I've learnt a lot because part of this for me was some upskilling in things like Open Source software, Wordpress, hosting, the process of blogging, how we do it. I've learnt such a huge amount and I've learnt so much with coming to these JISC events as well. I mean, I would never have attempted to make a video, I mean, I know it was a terrible video and it was a very shaky camera and stuff, it was only one minute long, but for me, that's a huge leap forward. So I've been upskilled, I've learnt a lot and I've also forgotten a lot but that's just par for the course.

And what we're going to do is to take this, we're not just leaving it now and saying, 'Oh well, it didn't work very well, that was a shame,' no, we've got something really valuable, we've got a community that are interested in reading it and we are going to widen it out.

So what we're going to do is to take this G-Blog and we're going to make it the repository of all things GTI and we're going to actually make it mandatory to be part of GTI, to all the businesses. This is sort of dovetailed now with a new opportunity we've got. There's lots of changes going on in the Business School, so once that finishes we're going to re-approach the academics and they'll perhaps be a bit more settled. We're also moving the incubator to new premises next door, and part of that is, we're making everybody re-register and we're putting in slightly different terms and conditions and we've got to go through this process. So we have an opportunity to say to people, 'Right, from the beginning of October, your involvement with G-Blog will be

mandatory because that will be the repository for everything GTI,' so we're going to put the meeting room bookings on it, we're going to put all our events on it, we're going to put every bit of information that they need, out of hours phone numbers; everything to do with GTI is going to be on the blog, so it really will, in fact, be the community resource for all the GTI businesses. So we're really pleased that we've been through the process and we will still go on trying to make it the listening zone between academics and the businesses and the other local SMEs, but how we are going to underpin that is by making it a necessity to them for their access and their usage of the incubator, and then once they start getting used to doing that all the time because it's necessary, then they'll already be on it and it won't be such a big deal to be blogging stuff about their businesses, as in, what they need from academics.

So one of the things that we think will kick it off is the access, the input from Dr. Paul Thomas who's the business doctor, he's the guy that did the BBC documentary, 'Ban the Boss'. It's absolutely revolutionary, it's wonderful and we think that he's going to be quite a coup for us to have, blogging, and we think that will draw people in, because what he has to say is very controversial, frightens managers to death, but at the same time, is really interesting when you get to know what he's achieving.

So actually it's all positive, so the Business Directory, day to day stuff, everything else is going to be on that, we're going to go forward with it, and I have absolutely no doubt that what we'll achieve is really valuable.

So the question today is, 'Did we share ideas, develop partnerships and foster knowledge exchange between local businesses and the University?' Well, we did sort of, not as much as we'd hoped. We've got people who read the blogs but don't post, we've got lots of offline links and we know that people are following the artificial intelligence data capture, that's bar coding and radio tagging, we've got a sushi company that we support and they went through that agency for all the bar coding on the sushi packs. Brilliant. Centre for Electronic Product Engineering, yes, we've got all of that going on as well, so we know that's working. We will have more quality posts, but we've already

got a good reputation for what is on there, is good, it's not trivial, it's interesting. And we are going to continue with the process. So all in all, I think it's been positive because what we've learnt is what will inform what we do and we will continue and we're very pleased that we started.

Those are the businesses that featured on the slide, and that's where we are at the moment.

So thank you very much for listening.

*(Round of applause).*

S: Thank you Pam and Grace. Almost to near perfect time, with a minute or two for questions. What I will say is that we have the panel session later on, so if you have more questions that occur to you during the session, then please raise them during that panel. Does anybody have something for Pam right now?

Q: Can I just ask about the scale of the community, how big is it and what would you regard as the core?

PV: We support about 40 live businesses in the incubator, at any one time. Over ten years we've helped about 450 businesses get started, and we have this rather cheesy strapline that we use, 'Give it a try with GTI.' (Laughter). And it's very much about people giving it a try, so not everybody goes on to actually run a business, but we do know that we have 54 businesses that are over three years old, successful, and we think we probably put about 2.5 million into the local economy.

S: Anything else? No? Just a final point from me, just thinking in terms of the whole project and the 8 trial projects, one of the things we've asked all of the trial projects who've been building some kind of community for some 'top tips' from them as to how to make that community a success, and that would be one of the key features of our final resource, so if you're interested in building

online communities, maintaining them, making sure that there are actually people in there, then that will actually be part of the final resource in a couple of months' time. Okay? But otherwise, thank you very much Pam and Grace, that was great!

We have a 15-minute changeover time again, so grab another cup of coffee. Just to remind you who's in which room, well in here next is Stephanie Warren under 'Exploring the Tools', New College Swindon, so if you're in that session you are in the right place. If you're going to Chris Turnock's session, who is actually at the back there, from Northumbria University, they are next door in the Wedgwood, and that leaves Brian McCaul, the University of Leeds furthering this thing about building and maintaining communities of practice, in the main session, in the main room. Okay? Thanks all very much! If you have questions for Pam, please do ask, otherwise in the next 10 minutes or so, make your way to the next group.

PV: Anybody is welcome to visit us at any time. It's a great place, it is...