

Plenary presentation, Making Links 2004

Welcome to you all. I'm Jill Sergeant, Convenor of the conference organising committee.

I'm just going to talk for a few minutes about the background to this event – why we're all here today.

A couple of years ago I got a call from Feona Studdert, who was then working at the Cancer Council of NSW, and whose work there included managing the website.

She was new to the job and wanted to talk over some of the issues with another community website person.

The NSWCC web team and I got together over coffee and had a chat about our websites – stuff like site reporting, content management systems, and web policy.

We thought of trying to get together a larger group to do the same thing.

Unfortunately Feona wasn't able to continue her involvement in this project, but I thought it was a great idea & picked up & ran with it. Following on from our informal meetings, I've organised a half day meeting (August 2003), and a full day workshop (May 2004), both in Sydney, both attended by about 20 people.

I've been fortunate in having the backing of my managers (Tim Childs and now Martin Bangs) to do this, because AFAO is a national organisation and part of our role is capacity building for our state and territory members.

So unlike many who are here today, I could justify the work time spent on trying to build a network for community web workers – it was to benefit our members.

So that's why AFAO has been involved at the level we have been.

And being a community organisation, of course, we are well aware that the challenges in our sector are shared by other community organisations across the board.

In the process of organising those meetings I discovered that the Sydney Catalyst collective – a loose coalition of activists – had already tried to do the same thing.

They had run a weekend conference in 2002, which I think was attended by about 40 people; had set up a website and the e-list which we have used to communicate about the conference.

A couple of guys from The Wilderness Society – John Habermann & James Gifford – were involved in that conference and were managing the e-list and a website (which is no longer live).

John has set up a new website, www.ngogeeks.com – it's full of techie stuff, name says it all.

John and James unfortunately weren't able to attend this conference, but you can hear about TWS adventures with open source technology from Evan Wills, who is presenting here.

Open source is an important option for NGOs to consider, and I hope that people will find the presentations and discussions in our technical stream valuable.

However there are of course lots of other challenges for community web workers and I hope you'll find that at least some of the issues relevant to each of you are covered in the program.

On the conference website we've touched on some of these, and in all my contact with presenters and conference delegates, and from discussion at the previous web workers meetings that AFAO hosted, some of the common issues have been confirmed:

- Funding problems – not only in terms of setting up and maintaining sites, but also in terms of ongoing training and development.
- When you do get sent for training, the course is full of bank employees or small business people who have completely different needs of their website – and the course is usually tailored to meet their needs, not yours.
- Being thrown into a website position because you were the only one in the org who was interested – but you don't necessarily have the expertise needed.
- Being a one-person band – like me: having to be project manager, techie, content editor, and graphics designer all in one. And I started out as a newsletter editor! It's been a steep learning curve.
- The bandwagon syndrome – setting up a site was a great idea, everyone's doing it, but did the board think about what it would take to keep it going? Was there any forward planning or vision?

Generally, the corporate sector doesn't face these kinds of challenges.

They have web teams and departments.

They have money.

Their bottom line is a bit different to ours.

They can afford to send staff on a course that costs \$800 a day.

They know why they have a website: to make money.

It's evident that the community sector needs its own space to address our specific challenges.

So about a year ago I started trying to pull together an organising committee for this conference.

I'm very pleased that we've achieved our goal and you are all here today.

I'm also very excited by the program we have to offer.

Although I've talked a lot about the challenges we face, the community & not for profit sector also have many strengths, as I'm sure everyone in this room knows.

There is an enormous knowledge base and range of skills in this room today.

We have an impressive expertise in what we do.

All of the presenters are either workers in community orgs, or people who have experience working with community orgs.

You are among your peers.

That's why we've tried to structure the conference to be as participatory as possible.

There will be plenty of opportunities to share your own expertise, showcase your ingenuity, discuss the solutions you've each come up with, and learn from each other's experiences.

In closing, I'd like to reiterate: this is your conference and your network.

On behalf of the organising committee, I encourage you not only to take what you know back to your organisations, but to make links, stay connected, and consider getting involved in maintaining the momentum, so that we can make conferences such as this a familiar landmark on the community landscape.

Thanks, and enjoy.

© **Jill Sergeant**
Website Officer
Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations
November 2004