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Checking with the World:

A new collaboration system lets anyone, anywhere voice an opinion

By Lisa Manfield

Backbone Magazine has a primary focus on how technology enhances business processes, markets, profitability and productivity and works as an active participant in the changing business world. 100,000 copies are distributed through Globe and Mail in Canada.

Charles Kelly addressed the Vancouver audience at the UN World Urban Forum (WUF) Habitat JAM session in May with a palpable air of exultation. That's because the commissioner general of the forum had achieved a feat never before accomplished: he had literally consulted the world on the themes to be addressed during the conference. And the world had responded.

Five months prior to the third WUF, Kelly hosted an online brainstorming session in partnership with IBM, UN Habitat and the government of Canada. A discussion of global proportions involving stakeholders from around the world, it was called the Habitat JAM, and it was the first time such an event had ever taken place.

The idea behind the jam was to engage people from around the world and from all walks of life, and to include participants ranging from urban planners to slum dwellers, academics to individual citizens—anyone with something to say about the cities in which they live. The intent was to bring these people together and give them an equal voice to share their thoughts on urban issues that affect their lives. Their ideas would then be sorted and filtered and form the agenda for the World Urban Forum.

On Dec. 1, 2005, nearly 40,000 people logged on to participate in the Habitat JAM, a 72-hour event which generated more than 4,000 pages of message-board style discussion, and resulted in 600 ideas to action. "The Habitat JAM fuelled the ideas we're talking about today," Kelly told the Vancouver audience. "It provided an outreach to people who couldn't make the trip to Vancouver."

Democracy online

The Web has always been seen as a democratic place where anyone with a computer and an Internet connection can share uncensored thoughts and ideas. A jam takes that concept and puts it to work for a specific purpose during a defined period of time. "A jam is a large, population-scale conversation among heterogeneous groups of people and individuals worldwide that happens online," said Mike Wing, vice-president of strategic communications at IBM in *The Story of the Habitat JAM*, a movie presented during the Habitat JAM session at WUF. "When I heard that the first opportunity we had to do a jam outside IBM was going to be on a topic as inherently social and progressive as the WUF, using the capacity of the Internet as an inherently global medium, I couldn't have imagined a better way for this medium to break out."

IBM pioneered jamming way back in 2001 as a way for the company's senior managers to connect and interact with their diverse and globally dispersed work force. Kelly learned about IBM's innovative technology through an article in the *Harvard Business Review* profiling IBM's CEO Sam Palmisano. In the interview, Palmisano discussed IBM's work in this area, highlighting the company's 2003 ValuesJam, an attempt to bring its entire workforce—all 340,000 employees in 170 countries—into one discussion forum to retool the firm's core values. Given the company had not examined its values for almost a century, Palmisano explained it needed to find an innovative way to do so, and that it had to be done respectfully and inclusively.

Corporate jamming

IBM has held six jams since 2001, all focused on various aspects of corporate management and company issues. "We had this global, distributed workforce with an enormous range of expertise and experience, and it became increasingly difficult to bring together that expertise in a traditional, hierarchical organization," Wing explained during the Habitat JAM session at WUF. "If you have to go through seven layers of approvals in order to put together a solution, you won't be doing it well and you won't be doing it in time. So one of the reasons the intranet at IBM was so important was that it made possible this global model of expertise solution creation."

Indeed, IBM's jam strategy took a decidedly non-hierarchical, power-to-the-people approach in solving operational issues. Its first jam in 2001 focused on capturing best practices throughout the organization, a sort of show and tell time for staff, with a dash of social mixing thrown in. "We invited all IBMers to act as if the company's organizational structures, processes and reporting lines didn't exist," Wing said. "Everybody's microphone had the same volume and anybody could come and express themselves."

Just as in regular Internet discussion forums, IBM's jams were not censored. But unlike many online chats, participants in both the IBM jams and the Habitat JAM were not anonymous. "One of the conventional wisdoms among people who spend a lot of time in online communities was that in order to get candid you need to be anonymous," Wing said. "It's not true. People were remarkably honest in these things, and nobody is anonymous, and the point is for people to meet each other." Wing admits that online discussions in and of themselves are old news. But jamming adds a new twist. "There have been threaded discussions on the Internet for 20 years, there's nothing new about that," he said. "What these were doing was creating a defined period of time in which everyone in the company was invited to participate and to engage with issues that are important to IBM."

Evolution, not revolution

IBM added an additional layer of functionality to its jam strategy: an information analysis capacity it called the jamalyzer. This tool captures and sorts all the responses, then uses data mining to identify patterns: keywords that repeat in sufficient frequency to be classified as themes.

For the Habitat JAM, WUF added to the mix a system of facilitators and local experts who encouraged discussion during the 72-hour event. Online discussion fused with live events, allowing people who had never used a computer to participate, said Gayle Moss, director of international marketing for the Habitat JAM. "Of the 39,000 people who participated, many had never touched a computer, but through facilitation and interpretation their voices were heard. We had three makeshift Internet cafés in slums in Africa where facilitators would type on participants' behalf. People were so passionate about getting their voices heard, they found ways to get it done."

Criticisms of the jam event were aired during the post-mortem session at WUF in Vancouver, and revolved primarily around the issue of accessibility. Why, asked many participants, would WUF use a high-tech medium like the Internet to reach a target group that, for the most part, doesn't even have access to computers? "We knew this was the number one concern and we went out and looked for champions who could work directly with groups normally excluded from such events—particularly women, youth and slum dwellers," Moss said. "People got on board and found access through universities or Internet cafés. Or they held physical meetings before and during the Habitat JAM and delegated their contributions to someone who could take them to the Internet."

Debbe Kennedy, founder, president and CEO of the Global Dialogue Center and Leadership Solutions Companies in Montara, Calif., found the jam to be highly accessible, particularly for people with disabilities. "One of our contributing editors, who is blind, told me his hair was standing on end he was so excited to see all these other people with disabilities online." While Kennedy's centre regularly hosts podcasts, blogs and online discussion forums in a bid to improve the world through discussion and leadership, she had never seen an online event quite as incredible as the Habitat JAM. "This was truly unprecedented communication of the human spirit. There was an instant camaraderie. With electronic communication you often don't realize how much of that energy transfers. You can really convey your heart. We found it addictive during those three days."

So addictive, in fact, that since the event Kennedy has continued her discussion—an exploration of what it means to be a good neighbour—which topped the popularity charts during the jam. "People wrote to me and so we decided to carry it on," she said. "We have since had five meetings to put our talk into action. It has been a springboard for many things." Kennedy is now planning a one-year anniversary celebration of the event through the centre's Knowledge Gallery—a visual exhibit of the results of the Good Neighbor Project. "If we could do this more often, we could change government and change the world," she said. "Because we all know what to do, and those three days gave everyone a chance to get started. I still visit the Habitat JAM site, and every time I go back, that energy is still there."

Kennedy and Moss both hope another Habitat JAM event will take place, perhaps prior to the fourth World Urban Forum to be held in China in 2008. "Funding is an issue," said Moss, adding that Canada funded the entire Habitat JAM the first time around.

Organizers of the jam also indicated they are taking all feedback and concerns to heart in order to refine the process for future events. "A jam is not a panacea," Wing said. "And it's important to remember that this is genuinely experimental. This doesn't pretend to change the world, but it opens up new possibilities."

Global Dialogue Center – Knowledge Gallery:

We Came to the Habitat JAM www.globaldialoguecenter.com/habitatjam

Habitat JAM www.habitatjam.com

World Urban Forum www.wuf3-fum3.ca

Caring Voices www.caringvoices.ca

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