

RCM and MRL – A reflection on two approaches to constructing community memory

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Abstract

Rete Civica di Milano (RCM) and Mackay RegionLink (MRL) have operated as two web-based community networks operating on opposite sides of the world. RCM celebrates its 12th anniversary in 2006, and is a rare success story in this field, yet its potential appears still to be realised. MRL has expended its funding from the Australian Government and is now off-line, yet could still provide a much needed basis for community growth in the Mackay Whitsunday region. It is timely to reflect on both projects to determine where they should go from here. This paper compares each network on the basis of context, purpose, and implementation, and discusses lessons learned from RCM that could be applied to MRL. It concludes that while both RCM and MRL have been markedly different in context and implementation, they have actually been trying to achieve the same purpose: to build a strong community based on active memory sharing from its citizens, government and private enterprise. RCM has built an admirable base for a citizen-driven network hosted by the University of Milan, that includes strong government participation, but perhaps now needs to encourage more participation by private enterprise (starting at the micro level) if it is to assist in improving the performance of the Milan business community. If MRL is to be successfully re-launched, it should continue to develop its links with private enterprise, as well as integrating itself much more as a community forum hosted by the local university, and achieving stronger government engagement at each level.

Keywords

online, community, network, government, online, citizens, memory sharing, private enterprise

Introduction

RCM (Rete Civica di Milano) and Mackay RegionLink (MRL) have operated as two web-based community networks operating on opposite sides of the world. RCM has just celebrated its 12th anniversary in 2006, and is a rare success story in this field, yet its potential appears still to be realised. MRL has expended its funding from the Australian Government and its online network has been withdrawn, yet it could still

provide much needed assistance for future community growth in the Mackay Whitsunday region. It is timely to reflect on both projects to determine where they should go from here. This paper compares each network on the basis of context, purpose, and implementation, and discusses lessons learned from RCM that could be applied to MRL. It is envisaged that this sharing of reflection and community memory will assist in future community development work in the Mackay region.

RCM Context

The city of Milan, where RCM is based, is the main city of northern Italy, located in the plains of Lombardy. The city has about 1,308,500 inhabitants (2004), but the population of the urban area (Great Milan, or *La Grande Milano*) is about 4,280,800 people (2006 estimate). Milan is also the provincial capital of *Provincia di Milano* (area of 1,984 km²), and the capital of the Lombardy region of Italy. As Wikipedia states: “The region is one of the three richest regions in Europe, with a per capita gross domestic product that is 50 percent higher than the rest of Italy. In fact the latest Eurostat figures shows that Lombardy in 2003 had the highest GDP for a region in the whole of the EU”. (Wikipedia 2006)

RCM, also known as ‘The Milan Civic Network’ is a community network (CN) started in September 1994 as a project of the Civic Networking Laboratory at the then Department of Computer and Information Sciences (DSI) of the University of Milan (Università degli Studi di Milano, UNIMI - also known in Milan as ‘Statale’). RCM was set up with a small investment by the university and donations from business sponsors primarily in the information-technology industry. Since then, it has survived through several research contracts, mainly from local-government organizations. However, RCM has never tried to be part of any government system. Because it is hosted by the university, RCM presents itself as an impartial third party, separate from the local (municipal, provincial, and regional) and national governments. This appears to have been an important factor in its success in gaining community support. To maintain this feature, RCM has created a so-called “participatory foundation,” something in between a traditional foundation and a citizens’ association. (Casapulla et al, 1998)

RCM Purpose

RCM's objective is to ensure appropriate communication, cooperation and distribution of services between members of the local Milan community. On the RCM Web portal there is a mixture of information, news, arguments and services. It is necessary to register, however, in order to actively participate and make use of all services. [RCM1]

One of the prime aims driving the development of RCM was to assist in designing the on-line services of local government through advice and feedback from a citizen-driven civic network that encouraged cultural, organizational, and technological innovation. [Casapulla et al 1998]

As a community network, RCM aims to be free and open with content provided by its members, bidirectional communication, and a strong focus on local issues. These principles are embodied in the slogan from its website "*la rete siete voi*" ("you are the network"), to inspire everyone who registers to be an active participant and promoter of discussion no matter what the theme. [RCM2]

To an extent, RCM has evolved into a *virtual Milan* that helps the community of *real Milan* communicate, debate, cooperate, and record community information. It also provides a learning environment in ICT technologies for people who would otherwise not have this opportunity. All of this works toward reinforcing the sense of identity of the Milan community [Casapulla et al 1998].

RCM Implementation

Community organizations within Milan can manage their own conferences on the Web via RCM via user-friendly software. The conference sites are independently managed by organization members, and the organization is also expected to become involved in the local community and discover where it can find interested citizens. An organisation might also decide to seek support from members of another conference in lobbying for better municipal services. It can send messages not only to its own conference members, but also to other conferences, thus initiating collaboration. Parallel actual events are also held to enable citizens to socialise face-

to-face. This adds to the community building nature of the network and reinforces the RCM slogan: “*la rete siete voi*”.

RCM has developed from the bottom up, without plans imposed from the top. Conference “administrators neither identify in advance nor suggest areas of discussion: they listen to citizens’ proposals for opening a new forum, note overlap or similarities with existing conferences, suggest the use of *aliases* to solve them, and juxtapose areas to facilitate navigation.” This administration task is now also carried out by users in cooperation with the staff. [Casapulla et al 1998]

RCM Results

With the development of RCM, which began in 1994, Milan now has a solid community network. The network includes an active community of citizens, by now very familiar with it, and on-line services provided by the major government institutions, non-profit organizations, and groups of professionals.[Casapulla et al 1998]

Discussion areas include those where:

- groups of professionals give advice to other citizens.
- RCM is used as a bridge between students out of school for a while (because of accident or illness) and their teachers and classmates.
- discourse occurs on Italian politics, thus fostering a breaking down of historical barriers inherited from the past (for example: fascism and the Second World War).

“More than 70 non-profit organizations have their own conferences in RCM. These include hobbyists (motorcyclists, kite lovers, archers, etc.), volunteers (SOS, Caritas, etc.), interest groups (including the local chapter of every major political party and trade-union locals), and professional associations. These conferences are directly filled with information and independently managed by some member of the organization itself: s/he informs the public of the organization’s initiatives, answers questions, and discusses issues with those who are interested. In some cases, the

organization or association also has private conferences, a sort of Intranet for its members.” [Casapulla et al 1998]

The factors raised previously by Casapulla et al [1998] appear to be still relevant today, that is:

- There are many competent, innovative, and motivated people in Milan willing and able to dedicate experience, skills, and time to making full use of the opportunities offered by ‘the net’ for community development. RCM has provided a vehicle for their wisdom to surface and be put to good use.
- The non-hierarchical context has encouraged communication and stimulated cooperation between the community and public officials on new or re-designed public services. It should be noted however that opposition still occurs from bureaucrats who fear the Web and its ability to make issues visible.

As RCM celebrates its 12th anniversary in 2006, its current status vindicates the original concept of a community network developed by the ‘grass roots’ community, with support and hosting by a university with a strong research focus.

MRL Context

In contrast to the Milan region, the Mackay Region comprises eight local government areas (LGAs) totalling 90,340 km² (45 times larger than the Province of Milan, or one third the size of Italy) with a population of 147, 374 (30 June 2005) a small fraction of that for the Province of Milan. The population density varies from low density urban (Mackay City with a population of 82,288 in 2,820 km²) to sparsely populated (Nebo Shire with a population of 2,107 in 10,024 km²) (PIFU Mackay 2006). The region extends for 380 km along the central coast of Queensland and 240 km inland. Its industrial centre, Mackay, lies almost 1000 km north of the state capital Brisbane (see Figure 1).

There is no regional capital or government centre - coordination of local government matters across the region is done via the Whitsunday Hinterland and Mackay Bowen Regional Organisation of Councils (WHAMBROC), a co-operative grouping of

LGAs that work together to “serve as a single point of contact, enhancing communication and consistency of standards and providing a continuing stimulus for action” (WHAMBROC). There is also no consistent ‘official’ name for the region – it can be known as *Mackay*, *WHAM*, *WHAMB*, or *Mackay Whitsunday* depending on the organisation.

Despite being a resource based region with strong coal and sugar exports supported by tourism and other forms of agriculture, the Mackay Region, like many other regional economies, is threatened by a restricted industrial base and the need to expend a significant proportion of regional income on purchasing services and goods from outside the region - including online transactions. Reflecting its primary industry focus, the Mackay region in 2002 recorded a Creativity Index of 41 that compares poorly with an Index of 992 for Global Sydney and ranks Mackay at 46 out of 62 for regions across Australia (National Economics, 2002, p. A5.79). This has led to poor perception of the value of online knowledge based products and consequent low level of development of information/knowledge based industries. Most local businesses outsource their knowledge acquisition capability from the major cities, believing, often with good reason, that such expertise is not available locally. (National Economics 2002)

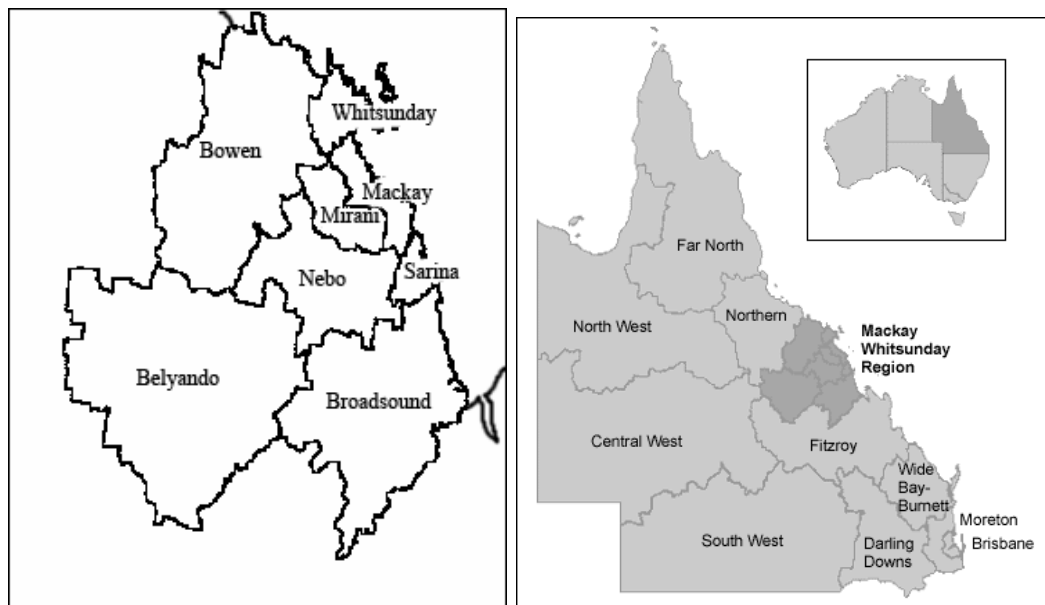


Figure 1. Map of Whitsunday, Hinterland and Mackay (WHAM) region, and the location of the region within the State of Queensland, and Australia [WHAMb 2000]

The need for adequate ICT infrastructure and training to assist in reversing this trend was identified through a series of industry meetings in 1997 and 1998 and public fora. A proposal for the Mackay RegionLink (MRL) project was developed and submitted by the Mackay Tourism & Development Bureau Ltd (MTDB) to the Australian Government under the Networking the Nation (NTN) program in 1998. This resulted in the awarding of a grant of \$930,000 from the Regional Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund (RTIF) in late 1998.

MRL Purpose

A comprehensive regional plan (WHAM 2015) was developed in 1994 for the Mackay region. A key issue identified was the lack of, and low priority given to, development of, information technology in the region. In this plan knowledge based industries were considered to be essential as infrastructure and service items, with their development being regarded as a precondition to the sustained growth and competitiveness of the region. The Mackay RegionLink (MRL) project was regarded as a key element in the implementation of WHAM 2015.

Community and Business needs that MRL was planned to work toward resolving included:

- Equitable community access to online services through the provision of twenty two publicly accessible kiosk points located throughout the region;
- Access to community information – both existing and to be developed in line with this project – to provide an online basis for community short and long-term memory;
- Information sharing between physically distanced communities and individuals through community for a on the Web portal;
- Access to opportunities for learning, both about the Internet and through the Internet;

- Access for businesses to local, state and federal government information services, provide new marketing opportunities, encourage networking and provide communications channels for export opportunities ; and
- Opportunity to develop a capacity for businesses to trade locally, nationally and internationally from one site – via e-commerce. [MTDB 1998]

To satisfy these needs, the following implementation objectives for MRL were developed:

- People are motivated to use information technology - An outreach program was implemented to promote awareness of Internet technology and the benefits of using the proposed MRL Web site.
- People have the skills to use the technology - A regional training program was implemented to develop basic skills for people to access the Internet.
- People have easy access to a regional information system – an online community network was developed to enable individuals and businesses across the region to access desired information and improve the sense of community and regional memory.
- Businesses have the ability to market and trade their goods and services effectively and efficiently online – it was planned for a later stage of MRL to assist businesses to trade online.

Through meeting the above objectives, MRL was designed to achieve the following outcomes:

- Decrease the sense of isolation within the region, by enabling people to obtain needed information when they wanted it. Users are able to access the Internet because they have the necessary infrastructure, skills, motivation and support.
- Community strength is increased because people value and use MRL as a source of regional information on social issues such as employment, government policy, education, sport, regional history and cultural events.

- Regional employment is increased with a strengthening of the local economy as a result of access to timely and accurate information.
- Disadvantaged (through isolation and small size) community groups and organisations become viable as they interact with other similar groups, forming a community wide network for support and interaction.
- Regional business trade is improved through increased business to business, business to consumer and community communications within the region
- Supply of goods and services becoming faster and more efficient, through greater business-to-business interaction (via email, electronic transfer of data, electronic trading, etc).
- Increase internal and global awareness of the region through aggregation of information online. External consumers, businesses and investors are attracted to the Mackay Region as they can readily assess what the Region offers and how it functions.(MTDB 1998)

With a working title of Mackay RegionLink, the portal was designed to provide a focal point for access to regional information online. It needed to be easy to use, locally owned and developed with a consistent 'look and feel' to represent a widely diverse region. Its primary aim was to provide easy access to regional information.

Along with the provision of a website, access to the Internet was required for the large proportion of people who, in 1998, did not have access. At the time, the issue of dial up access was important as few homes were online, therefore public access to the Internet was required in many communities.

The final element of the project was training, as it was well recognised that without the appropriate skills, community take-up would be limited (Taylor & Jewell 2003).

MRL Implementation

Once the project funding had been announced, long delays occurred which changed the scenario somewhat. This required a number of business plan rewrites and a revision of the Australian Government Contract. The approved business plan focused

on provision of basic Internet training, provision of regional web kiosks or public Internet access centres, and development of a Mackay RegionLink Web Site.

The training plan involved the training of 2000 people at 'in situ' sessions across the region.

The second element of the program provided local Internet cafes in twenty locations throughout the region, concentrating on small remote population centres. The aim was to provide free access for the community so that local enablers could encourage local participation and skill enhancement.

The third element of the program was the Mackay Community Web portal, providing something that was very easy for community groups to use and update. The aim was to have every business and community group in the Mackay region represented on the web site within two years, with rent for the business web pages funding its continued operation and development. This part of the project was seen as key to strengthening the regional culture and sharing its memory.

Changes in the MRL operating environment.

After funding approval in November 1998, many changes occurred in the operating environment of MRL in terms of:

- Project Management – the project was steered by three project managers in turn. Early implementation was also undertaken with little reference to the originators of the project.
- Changeover of people involved in project decision making.
- Technology – Telstra rolled out its 'MegaPOP' system enabling local call access to the Internet from anywhere in Australia. This was a significant step forward in the ability of individuals and businesses to access the Internet but caused significant delays in practical project commencement until details were known.
- Software – advances in available software solutions that contributed to delays in decision making and implementation of the online network.

- Community attitude to MRL – from ‘expert’ driven to community driven.
- Computer use – rapid increase in home ownership.
- The models used for long-term funding for development and maintenance of the community portal proved to be non-viable. Various approaches were tried – none succeeded.

The turnover in people involved with Mackay RegionLink was a significant issue. At federal government level, there were at least three Project Officers with different views on funding. Similarly state government agency structures and personnel involved with the broader ‘digital divide’ agenda changed often over the course of the development and delivery of this project. As well as this, the structures and personnel of the support Non Government Organisations (NGOs) and Mackay RegionLink changed substantially to a stage where there is now only one person (from CQU) who has been involved with the project since conception. These changes have not only affected the organisational memory of the project in support agencies but also within the project itself.

During the course of the project, the attitude of local ICT retailers and training providers changed. When the Mackay RegionLink concept was first proposed, there were few local ICT businesses interested in the project. When the project began to take shape, some small ICT retail businesses felt suspicious and threatened and were vocal in their representative and political circles of influence. Project staff sought to engage these business people to demonstrate the value of growing the IT products and services sector in the region and promoted the project aims of outsourcing where appropriate however this message was never accepted by some.

Probably the most important change was that of perceptions of the project ‘drivers’. When Mackay RegionLink was conceived, it was ‘expert’ driven. The local actors who sought the funding had high levels of technical understanding coupled with both economic and altruistic motives. This gave the project a ‘technical expert’ feel. However, as the project has progressed, it became more driven by community inputs and needs. For example, community members increasingly attended fora with well-articulated needs for resource allocations from the project. A number of mayors and

CEOs of local government authorities now see the project as a viable means to consolidate their business groups and community memory.

The rapid increase in home-use of the Internet completely shifted the focus of MRL from training to Web portal and provided a larger potential base in the community for interest, project credibility, referral and access to low-level IT support. This changed the dynamic of the project as more people related to the practical 'do-ability' aspects and the 'not for us' syndrome reduced. This potential support has yet to be properly tapped.

MRL Results

On 30 June 2003, major funding from the Australian Federal government for MRL ceased. The aspects of the MRL plan involving training and provision of 21 public Internet access centres had been completed.

Formal community training courses had been conducted for 2168 participants in computers, internet and email over a period of 21 months in 27 locations.

The public Internet access centres were installed in a variety of locations including libraries, Rural Transaction Centres, Communities Centres, a commercial vehicle service station, and Tourist Information Centres. Most centres are still offering low cost access to the Internet together with other computer related services. Over 9200 users had been physically recorded in these Centres in the first year.

A major part of the Web portal had been developed and was operational however there were strong doubts as to its sustainability. It was designed to provide a wide range of services and information online, representing all the Local Government Areas through either content or links to content. Publicly available detail for 6000 local businesses and most regional community organisations, had been loaded onto the portal, with each organisation having access and update capability for its own web page.

This proved valuable in the smaller communities but was never widely taken up by the Mackay City business community (Cameron November 2003). Unfortunately, even after a variety of marketing and selling strategies, the vast majority of businesses

saw no value in paying even a small rent or buying advertising, to give them visibility on a regional Web portal – the concept of a geographic cluster to increase business marketability did not take hold. Lack of a regional culture and cohesion also contributed to this. A local survey in 2003 showed that only 20% of businesses in the Mackay region used an Intranet in their businesses and a mere 12% currently use the internet for online selling (DBI 2003). With severe time competition in small businesses, owners and staff saw little need to become involved in new ideas unless they had been proven and were being successfully used by someone else.

By April 2005, all funds had dried up and hosting of the Web portal ceased. In 2006, the public Internet access centres across the region are the only visible elements of the MRL project remaining. These are seen as important facilities most often combined with other community facilities and maintained by a mix of local government and community funding, and staffed, in the main, by voluntary workers.

Comparison of Contexts

When comparing the contexts of each community network, it can be seen that RCM, by being situated in Milan at the hub of Italy's information technology industry and commercial enterprise, was probably more able to secure donations from ICT business sponsors to develop and sustain its network. MRL was much less able to secure sustainability because such donations were not forthcoming from the fledgling ICT businesses in Mackay - the ICT industry in Queensland is centralised in the South-East corner of Queensland (around Brisbane, 1000 km south of Mackay). RCM and Milan businesses are thus able to source ICT services and goods from within Milan, whereas in Mackay, the lack of available local expertise leads Mackay businesses to acquire externally. This leaves MRL with a lack of local ICT businesses to draw on for support.

RCM is deliberately not part of a government system. It is hosted by a university and is seen as an impartial third party. MRL was managed by the Mackay Tourism & Development Bureau Ltd (MTDB) using Australian Government funds.

Unfortunately, some stakeholders in the region thought that either MTDB and/or MRL project staff were seeking to take business from them and opposed the project

rather than working with it. MRL was never seen as impartial by these people. Others sought to funnel funds in a direction of their choosing rather than according to the funding charter. The university research focus of RCM was also in marked contrast to that of MRL.

Perhaps the most striking difference in project contexts between RCM and MRL though were in terms of geography and population. One could say that RCM had the relative luxury of being able to focus primarily on providing a platform for articulate people to voice their opinion. MRL had first to inform people about online community networks, encourage them to use one, train them to use it, and provide infrastructure that enabled them to access it - across a sparsely populated area one third the size of Italy. Perhaps the objectives of MRL were a little ambitious. It could also be argued that, considering the Creativity Index for the Mackay region, Milan was more ready for an online community network than Mackay.

Comparison of Purpose

The focus of RCM was strongly aimed at individuals, whereas, because of its funding charter, MRL had a strong economic and technology focus. Although the project founders fought to give the project a stronger people focus, the MRL funding charter laid down by the Australian government circumvented this to a large extent.

The purpose of RCM is to promote communication and cooperation between members of the Milan community. It achieves this by encouraging users to add their own information. By contrast, the MRL online network concentrated on providing the community with access to community information, and giving less priority to community discussion. Fora were available and community discussion could take place, but this appeared not to be a priority need within the community – this attitude might have changed in recent years and would have to be re-surveyed to assess the need.

Community participation in RCM might be inhibited to an extent, by the need to supply formal proof of identity when registering. Countering this, however, it could be argued that a benefit of this requirement is that online discussion is more likely to

accurately represent community opinion. MRL did not insist on proof of identity in order to encourage active participation.

A major focus of MRL was to give visibility to regional businesses in order to increase their business as well as providing MRL with a source of funding and sustainability for the community/social aspect of the Website. RCM appears not to have involved many local businesses as key stakeholders (apart from those in the ICT industry). When considering the growing competition to small businesses from large discount businesses, perhaps RCM does have a part to play in assisting them.

Comparison of Implementation

The RCM concept and system was developed from the bottom up through close collaboration between community members and RCM staff thus fostering strong ownership of RCM by the community. In contrast, MRL staff found it difficult to gain much advice from the community on design of a Web portal (at least initially) as many had only a vague idea of what they wanted. MRL staff were therefore forced to proceed with developing a community portal with minimal initial community input. It was only towards the end of the project that the worth of the portal and strong feedback on its design began to appear.

RCM appears to have had funding sponsors that were more flexible and less demanding in terms of visible achievement. MRL had to abide by the reporting requirements of its funding charter from the Australian government which slowed progress, frittered valuable resources and curbed development based on community input. Delays caused by other project changes (previously discussed) also put pressures on project staff to develop the online network more quickly than desired.

While RCM focused on community conferencing, MRL undertook basic Internet training, provision of public Internet access centres, and development of a Mackay RegionLink Web Site.

There also do not appear to have been many changes of members involved with RCM when compared with MRL. This aspect is worthy of future research.

The funding model of MRL when compared with RCM appears on face value to have been fatally flawed, however, in the last year, the Rotary Club of Airlie Beach Inc (based in Whitsunday Shire of the Mackay Region), has placed online the information from its community telephone guide (see: www.mywhitsunday.com). Funding for the phone guide and website comes from advertising. It would seem therefore that at least some businesses in the region see value in advertising in this manner and perhaps the time is now right to resurrect the MRL concept albeit in a revised manner.

Lessons from RCM that could be applied to MRL

Because RCM is hosted by the University of Milan and not part of a government system it is seen as being an ‘honest broker’ in community discussion. MRL could perhaps also benefit in this way if it were re-launched and hosted by a local research institution such as Central Queensland University (CQU).

Learning from RCM, a future MRL should be sponsored by a foundation setup by the research institution with a board comprising representatives from research, community and business groups, and government (local, state, national). This foundation should seek to gain funding that enables MRL to enact board decisions without providing too many restrictions.

To improve regional community input, MRL could follow the lead of RCM and seek the involvement of ICT and other tertiary students in development work and managing discussion conferences as well as putting much more time and effort into community outreach across the region, including social events to gain face-to-face community interaction as well as interaction online. The focus of a future MRL needs also to be strongly aimed at giving individuals fora for raising issues of concern, as well as retaining an economic and technology focus.

A re-visited MRL concept and system needs to take into account the ‘bottom up’ approach adopted by RCM to foster strong ownership of MRL by the community. Indications are with SMS texting, that this would now be more feasible than even a few years ago.

MRL needs to concentrate on gaining and retaining a core body of people with a passion for the project who can give it stability and build a solid foundation of corporate memory and knowledge. As discussed previously, this aspect is worthy of future research and this paper is regarded as a necessary step in that process.

The most important lesson, though, that MRL can learn from RCM, is to retain contact with the ever helpful RCM staff and continue to learn from their experience and research. Although there are major differences in context for the two organisations, increased interaction between the two organisations would certainly benefit MRL.

Lessons from MRL that could be applied to RCM

Although the community discussion approach by RCM has shown itself to be robust and is to be applauded, perhaps RCM could learn from MRL and involve local businesses (not just those in the ICT industry) more as key stakeholders. RCM could provide online visibility to them as well as assisting them to move from a mainly cash economy to the use of at least some electronic means to increase their business performance. Action such as this could occur as a result of discussion on how small local businesses are going to survive the competition from large cut-price companies that is now taking effect.

The Way Forward for MRL

Impediments and enablers to implementation of the MRL project have been discussed previously by Wallace and Jewell (2003). Based on experience since then and the above reflection, it is proposed that for MRL to have future success, it needs strong project champions who have a thorough understanding of the project and strong leadership qualities. The ability to work with the ‘knockers’ of the project and to bring them on side in the early stages is vital. Project champions must fully understand the cultural differences among key stakeholders and be able to motivate all parties to communicate, share information, and interact positively.

There is then the need to:

- Sponsor a future MRL using a foundation established by a research institution with a board comprising representatives from research, community, business, government (local, state, national).
- Have MRL seen as an impartial third party by the wider community. Thus it should be re-launched and hosted by the local campus of a research institution such as Central Queensland University (CQU).
- Re-determine the key stakeholders and the desired impacts to be achieved. Strongly focus on strategic as well as operational issues, in order to gain project sustainability.
- Employ project staff with a balance of technical and community practice skills to ensure good communication between project staff and the community.
 - Design an organisation appropriate for the project. It will be important for the future MRL to have significant regional presence and to be an 'officially' recognised regional body. (Other regional models in Australia appear to be driven by local government).
- Actively engage the community and market the project and its benefits to key stakeholders on a continuing basis, and ensure that resources are made available for this. The project manager must also be cognisant of changing technology and how it can profoundly change community needs and desires.
 - Encourage 'buy-in' to the project by local government agencies, particularly in the larger administrative centre. Active community participation could provide Local, State and Federal Governments with a new mechanism to gain voter feedback regarding government policies.
 - Strongly engage the ICT industry sector (eg, Mackay Information Technology Network, a local industry cluster of about 80 members).
 - Improve regional community input through greater collaboration with staff at the Public Internet Access Centres.

- Be wary of funding agency approval requirements that have a bias for short-term, quantitative, accountancy based and repetitious approaches, as opposed to the 'grass roots' requirements at the community level – otherwise a project team can be driven by due diligence necessity rather than concentrating on project achievement.
- Seek useful models of community information networks and CI approaches, and provide comparative evaluations for project guidance - This paper is a step in that direction.
- Develop links with other research institutions (University of Milan, Community Informatics Researchers (CIRE), Monash University) and to acquire expertise and extend the community network model.
- Re-develop links with like-minded groups in regional Australia, such as at Wangaratta, Maleny, and Kalgoorlie thus gaining a wider community for support, learning, and motivation.

Conclusions

While both RCM and MRL have been markedly different in context and implementation, they have actually been trying to achieve the same purpose: to build a strong community based on active memory sharing from its citizens, government and private enterprise. RCM has built an admirable base for a citizen-driven network hosted by the University of Milan, that includes strong government participation, but perhaps now needs to encourage more participation by private enterprise (starting at the micro level) if it is to assist in improving the performance of the Milan business community. If MRL is to be successfully re-launched, it should continue to develop its links with private enterprise, as well as integrating itself much more as a community forum hosted by the local university, and achieving stronger government engagement at each level.

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