

**Cambridge AWiSE: Dealing with Sustainability of Networks.
Summary of a presentation by Dr Jenny Koenig, Cambridge AWiSE Steering
Group.**

The UKRC Connect Networking Event, Mon 6 December, Arup, London.

1. AWiSE as a national organisation was founded in 1994 and the Cambridge branch arose soon afterwards. The idea of a national organisation came from discussions following publication of the report “The Rising Tide”. The group who wrote the report contained two important Cambridge-based women, Dr Nancy Lane and Dr Joan Mason. Joan went on to found AWiSE and became its founding Chair. Further detail of the history of AWiSE can be found on the Cambridge AWiSE website www.camawise.org.uk/about.html
2. In the 1990’s AWiSE had a number of branches around the country and it established a website and raised funds nationally through membership fees and government and corporate sponsorship. The branches were run in a fairly ad-hoc manner with motivated women taking on the organisation of meetings. The Cambridge branch was largely academic in focus.
3. Why was AWiSE set up? From the AWiSE Magazine “Forum” in 1998:
 - Making links with mentors, role models and sources of advice.
 - Other women who have had similar experiences are likely to be the best source of advice.
 - When there are few women working in close physical proximity, it can be extremely difficult to find anyone to get advice from.
4. Joan Mason’s influence, drive and energy were incredibly important to the success of the organisation. She was able to encourage others to get involved and did whatever she could to help others. Many of these people later came forward to offer their own help wherever they could. Joan’s attitude was summed up by the phrase “so what are we going to do about it then”. This underlines the ethos of CamAWiSE being a place where women want to do positive and constructive things to help themselves and each other.
5. The Cambridge branch was essentially refounded in late 2003. As Joan’s health began to deteriorate she encouraged others to take over. Joan died in 2004 and the future of the national organisation became uncertain, particularly as the, then new, UKRC was formed. Anne McLaren, also Cambridge-based, was the President of national AWiSE and she and the Vice-Presidents took the decision to put national AWiSE into a period of dormancy in mid-2005. At this stage Cambridge AWiSE was increasing in strength with a good programme of meetings and a clear demand for its services and we decided that CamAWiSE should be established as a separate organisation with its own constitution, membership fees and database, website and governance structure.
6. As Cambridge AWiSE increased in size it became clear that it was no longer possible for it to work as an entirely volunteer-run organisation. The choice at this point was to return to being a small ad-hoc group or to obtain funding in order to become more substantial. Our decision was to set about searching for

funding to provide part time administrative support. We were successful in our application for a grant from the UKRC and a part-time coordinator, Dr Lucy Spokes, was appointed in Sept 2006. This grant was matched with funds from a number of sources including membership fees and university and corporate sponsorship.

7. The appointment of a part-time administrator allowed us to establish more systematic ways of working and a more professional image. The administrator's role is to reply to email enquiries, deal with event logistics, update the website, increase the efficiency of our event publicity, maintain our database of contacts. The number of (paid-up) members increased from 12-20 in 2006 up to 70 in 2007 and now nearly 100. The number of people on our email list increased from less than 200 in 2006 to nearly 400 today.
8. Who are our members? Approximately half are from academia and of those a little under half are students (mainly graduate students). Around 15-20% are women who are looking to return after a career break and approximately 30% are based in industry or small businesses or self-employed. Most of our members are in their thirties and forties: approx 20% of our members are graduate students, mainly in their twenties.

9. What do we do?

Networking meetings:

role models - "navigating my career", moving from the lab to ...
career development & skills eg writing, presentations, CV's,
confidence, elevator pitches etc

Mentoring: publicise MentorSET, training workshops

Information: newsletters, website www.camawise.org.uk, e-bulletins

10. What is our business model?

We charge membership fees: these contribute to our running costs but do not cover all of the costs of running the organisation. We charge door entry fees which cover the immediate costs of the event (eg food, room hire). We have obtained sponsorship from local organisations but all of this has required the steering group to network and to identify and influence the right people. We have tried writing letters asking for funding, and even at times phoning people but find that it doesn't work without some sort of "warm" contact and particularly in the last year or so the standard response has been "times are hard".

The flip side of the coin to getting funding is reducing expenditure and we do this by collaboration. Collaborating with a range of organisations means that we often don't have to pay for room hire and sometimes not for refreshments. Collaborations also means that we can widen our sphere of influence and get more people to find out about us. Collaborations usually work well in both directions.

11. Leadership, operation and governance. The steering group, led by the Chair, set the strategy, make contacts, identify and invite speakers and assist with the newsletter. The steering group are motivated women, coming from a range of

organisations, who know what our audience is likely to want or need. Our steering group ranges in size from 10 – 15 and includes women from industry, University, research institutes (of which there are many in Cambridge), small businesses and the whole range of STEM subjects. The Chair's role is one of co-ordination and encouragement – encouraging new steering group members to join as others leave, chivvyng people along and chairing meetings of the steering group.

I cannot emphasise enough how important it is to have a reasonably-sized group of women taking responsibility for the organisation and to be continually drawing in new blood. From time to time people either move away or have a baby or get a promotion and they may not be able to contribute as much as they have before so it is vitally important that new people are drawn in to replace them before they actually leave. Of the 13 women on the steering group in 2006, 5 are still with us in 2010: some have moved away, others have had babies and others have changed their focus.

The other important point here is the paid administrator who responds to email enquiries, collates information, updates the website. These are all small tasks that add up to a lot and having one point of contact makes things easier for the volunteers as well as helping the organisation to look more professional.

Looking back over the last seven years what strikes me most is how much we have evolved and how much we have struggled with this idea of sustainability. As the political and economic climate has changed around us we have had to adapt. Our ability to adapt is dependent on our steering group and we have been fortunate to have people in the group with a wide range of experiences. Interpersonal skills are important and so is enterprise training and the personal development of our steering group members.

12. To summarise the key points:

- paid administrator is essential
- steering group with range of contacts/skills
- do not try to rely on one or two key individuals
- enterprise training/advice on governance
- clarity of purpose, responding to need
- collaboration
- loyalty/sense of connection
- keep evolving...