

**LEARNING UNCUT EPISODE 24:
BUILDING CAPABILITY WITH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE - KIM SHERWIN**

- Michelle Ockers: Welcome to another episode of Learning Uncut. I'm Michelle Ockers.
- Karen Moloney: And I'm Karen Moloney.
- Michelle Ockers: And today we're talking to Kim Sherwin, the Arup University Leader of Australasia about Skills Networks. Welcome Kim.
- Kim Sherwin: Thank you, it's great to be here.
- Michelle Ockers: And we are delighted to have you here today. Arup is a slightly unusual organisation. Could you introduce us to what the organisation does and tell us a little bit about the collectivist nature of the organisation, Kim?
- Kim Sherwin: Absolutely, so Arup is a global organisation and we are engineers, designers for the built environment, so we are a consultancy firm and we've been around for more than 70 years. We're founded by our founder, Ove Arup - so Ove Arup, which is where we get our name from. Sometimes people confuse that, whether it stands for something. It's actually the surname of our founder. We're set up in trusts so as a company doesn't have any shareholders, so this makes a real difference to how we operate as an organisation. We're not accountable to shareholders, we're accountable to ourselves, so people feel invested in what we're doing because we're doing it for each other. We're also rewarded equitably through a profit share as well, so our success individually also relates to everybody else's success and it makes a real difference to how we operate.
- Michelle Ockers: It's quite a large and globally-spread organisation, isn't it, Kim?
- Kim Sherwin: It is, yes, so we've got about 14,000 people on staff and we're spread across the globe, split up into five regions. I'm part of the Australasia region, which includes all the major centres in Australia plus New Zealand, Singapore, Indonesia and soon to be Malaysia as well. We have about two and a half thousand people in our region spread across different offices and timezones as well, and obviously cultures.
- Michelle Ockers: Yeah, so it's interesting how well that the idea of the collectivist nature of the organisation has scaled over the years, which I thought was why it was worth pointing out the size and distribution of the organisation. Can you tell us a little bit, describe a little bit how people work at Arup?
- Kim Sherwin: Yeah, so we operate as one Arup even though we're spread up into the five regions, and one of the really key things is that we're a multidisciplinary organisation, so that means we like to bring lots of different disciplines to the projects that we work on. Often that will mean that people working the

projects not based in their home city, so they'll be working across different cities, across different regions and across obviously different cultures and this makes it really important, so we try and bring our best people to the work that we do and it means therefore that people can be working across timezones and also on some really interesting projects, not in then obviously their home city.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah, so there's a, obviously, you need to be continuing to develop skills for working in this way, skills both in the discipline and to be able to work across disciplines, what are the main ways that capability is developed at an individual group and organisational level?

Kim Sherwin: Knowledge at Arup is very important, and our only real asset at Arup is our people, so we place an awful lot of emphasis on developing our people and I'm actually fortunate enough to lead what's known as Arup University at Arup. Each of our five regions has one of these universities, and basically, it's to develop our people and our capability and to help us deliver and be the best as we possibly can be in each of our respective disciplines, and these are kind of based around what we call our Skills Networks or our Communities of Practice.

Michelle Ockers: Okay, so the Skills Networks are at the heart of how capability gets developed in the organisation then?

Kim Sherwin: Yes, they are, so they're probably the only thing at Arup that straddles all of our businesses and all of our geographies. It's something that we encourage new starters to get involved with, it's something that our graduates go through. It's also something that our most senior people will be there to support the growth of others as well, so it's all based around the premise of technical skill, technical expertise and knowledge sharing.

Michelle Ockers: Okay, and so the Skills Networks are - just to help people get their heads around what is a Skills Network? I think if we think of a more common piece of terminology, maybe if I can use the term, they're a form of Community of Practice, would that be right?

Kim Sherwin: Absolutely, yes, and we've just sort of called it a Skills Network for internal purposes, but it's the basic principles are around communities of practice and these are around our major disciplines, so for example, we're obviously multidisciplinary, we have things like the more technical discipline, so structural, rail, highways, aviation, through to some of the more specialist disciplines around fire, acoustics, theater consulting for example, so we span the whole spectrum of skillsets across our business.

Michelle Ockers: Okay, and at the moment there are 43 formal Skills Networks in place that the organisation funds and formally supports, is that right?

Kim Sherwin: That's correct, and each of the regions has a sort of a similar amount. It also depends on the focus of a particular region and where our market is. In the

Australasia for example, we have 36 Skills Networks and this sort of focuses the mind on what our key areas of skill are and also what our offering is to the market.

Michelle Ockers: Okay, so you talked about the Skills Networks being a kind of central part of how capability is developed in the organisation. Would you say that's the core purpose of the Skills Network, to build capability or would you discuss the, or describe the purpose of the Skills Network differently from that?

Kim Sherwin: I think it's to, in summary, I would that covers it, but it's really to equip our professionals with the expertise and the skills that they need to be the best in class. It's also to have a presence externally as well, so we are bringing our best people to our projects, and also that we're bringing the best knowledge to our projects as well, so one of the really exciting and interesting pieces around our Skills Network is the exchange of knowledge and people use what we call forums to post questions and then they can post technical questions which then can be brought back into our client project work, so when people buy, I guess, a service from Arup, they're not just buying an individual's experience, they're buying a whole of Arup experience and these forms really do support this, and it's quite impressive to see, even as technology's changed, the innate behaviour that we have here in terms of culture and sort of knowledge sharing is really brought to life through our Skills Networks.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah, and I know Karen's going to dig into how the Skills Networks operate in a moment. One more strategic kind of question before we start unpacking what it looks like to be part of the Skills Network and how they function. How do you decide, or who decides and how do you decide what networks to establish and invest in? Because, the organisation does fund these Skills Networks.

Kim Sherwin: Yeah, so often these are based around our core disciplines, so as I eluded to before, the likes of the structural Skills Network is our founding discipline, but also, we're constantly looking at new trends and where we need to be positioning our business and where we need to develop or grow new skills, then we will consider creating a new Skills Network. This is done in consultation, obviously with the business because we want the skills in the business to be very much aligned because obviously one informs another. We have a governing body called the Arup University Counsel, which actually formally approves and establishes new Skills Networks.

Michelle Ockers: Okay, so there's a governance process. The University is part of it in consultation with the business?

Kim Sherwin: Absolutely, and this also happens across the regions and also at a global level as well, so we make sure that we're developing it for the right reasons and not just because.

Michelle Ockers: It sounds highly consultative.

Kim Sherwin: Absolutely. Very, very consultative, and I think that also goes to our ownership structure in that everybody has an opinion and everybody wants to make a contribution because we're all in this together and you know, it creates to our ... I guess it leads to our collective success.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah, absolutely, so Karen, let's dig into how the networks operate a little more.

Karen Moloney: Okay, so I'm assuming then, so if it's a very consultative process to decide which networks to invest in, does it fill the same process to decide who will lead that particular network?

Kim Sherwin: Yeah, so we appoint a skills leader for each of the respective networks, and this is both appointed at a regional level, 'cause each, as I said before, each of our regions is quite different, but then there's also a global skills leader and the appointment of these particular individuals is based on them being the technical expert in that particular discipline, so the go-to person, the person who's got the most experience, and is also great at developing and leading people as well because these communities are only as effective as the leader and also of the participants to actually, I guess, drive forward new skills development and such like, so these appointments are our regional board appointments, so they carry some gravitas and they are seen as a career path within Arup as well.

Karen Moloney: Okay, so the role of that person is very much a leader for that particular network but what activities would they run, so yes we're going to do the network, yes we got a person to lead it, what do they then do to take that forward?

Kim Sherwin: They set the, I guess, the strategic agenda of the individual network, so where the focus is going to be. We tend to sort of focus around four areas - so one is around learning. One is around research. One is around the impact of digital, and then there's also, obviously the eye on the future as well, so not that these are just existing skills, it's about furthering skills from new market requirements or where that particular discipline should be going. They set the agenda and that might be about creating initiatives, it might be creating learning programs, it might be doing research, it might be engaging externally, but these are also roles that are in, I guess in duet with daytime jobs, so it's important that the skills leader creates a network of people to help drive the Skills Network, so we often see that a Skills Network leader will appoint a manager, so the manager would be at the more operational level as galvanizing and making, I guess, the strategy come to life.

Our most successful Skills Networks go right through the various levels of experience and expertise, and they'll really engage the grassroots levels because that's technically the future of the Skills Networks as well, so if they're passionate and as inspired and want to get involved, then it's obviously going to lead to the overall success of the Skills Network.

Karen Moloney: Okay, and in terms of, so that's got a nice sort of overall structure for networking in terms of it, that's where the focus is. Is there like a template or a set process that people follow within the network, so i.e. do they kind of all operate in the same way?

Kim Sherwin: Yeah, there are a few, I guess, procedural template mechanisms largely driven by financial years, so we do annual planning cycles and annual funding cycles, but Arup's a very organic organisation and people don't take to kindly to too much control.

Karen Moloney: I don't think anybody would take too kindly to that, to be honest.

Kim Sherwin: One of the roles of my team is to enable the Skills Networks and to help them get sort of good outcomes that are shared and are a value to the whole network, not necessarily making them do a tick box exercise of all the things that they might like to do, it's more enabling and encouraging and letting people sort of choose their own adventure within some sort of boundaries of finances.

Karen Moloney: Okay, so we mentioned already that the Skill Networks are one of the core ways to develop employees at Arup, can we just take a look at more into some of the actual activities that the networks get involved in that support professional development and the ongoing development of the organisation as a whole?

Kim Sherwin: Of course, yeah so, I guess being an engineering and design consultancy, we have professional engineers and engineers will go for chartership to be chartered engineers and so there's obviously the learning components of the CPD requirements. We would support that through some of the learnings that we create and we store those, I guess the CPD records, we use Moodle, and so we use the technology to enable professional development that way. We also do undertake research, so that's giving money to the business to go and generate new knowledge for Arup. That's really, really, a powerful thing for us to do because we find a lot of people come to join Arup to work on cool projects of course but also to have the opportunity to flex their creative muscle and to be innovative, and sometimes our client projects might not allow for that level of creativity because it's obviously a client brief, obviously not with all projects but this also then also gives them an opportunity to hone some new skills, connect with some new people, generate some new knowledge.

Karen Moloney: Okay. Arup's quite obviously large and globally spread organisation with like 14,000 staff across the world, so logistically, how did the networks operate? 'Cause we're seeing face to face is the preferred way to do that, but I can imagine obviously the skill sets that you need are not necessarily in the same geographic location, so how does that work?

Kim Sherwin: Yeah, that's a constant challenge, constantly concerned about flying people around the world to connect but we're a very people focused organisation, and a lot of relationships come from spending time together and particularly

because of the types of work that we do in terms of the multidisciplinary projects and bringing lots of different levels of expertise. However, we also try and be resourceful where we can, so for example, with our learning programs, we might run virtual classrooms, so we might bring people together virtually to learn, and we also do online learning modules as well but probably one of the most successful connectors of people is the Skills Network forums which I mentioned earlier.

It's a way that people can feel connected without actually being sat next to somebody, and they can tap into lots of different kinds of knowledge across different countries using an online forum, and this is also housed within a Skills Network site that we have on our intranet. We have one intranet at Arup, and so people regardless of which office they're sat in, they're accessing the same information and then obviously can drill down to a more regional or country specific.

Karen Moloney: Okay, so the forums themselves are quite critical to success of the networks, then. How are they structured and how do people actually use them, how do they know where to go to find things or do things, like what were they used for mainly?

Kim Sherwin: Yeah, so the forums are mostly used for technical insight and information, so somebody might post a question, you know "I'm working on a client project and I need to know about a particular type of concrete or setting concrete in particular climates" and so they would post a question to the forum. Then anybody who is subscribed to the forum - you can go in and subscribe to multiple forums based on discipline - would receive an email which includes the question and then you can either self-select to receive all, you know, subsequent replies or just the initial question, then if it's of interest, you can go and check it out online.

It's very email driven but it's actually very successful in terms of, we live a lot out of our email at Arup and that's the way that people consume and share, so we've sort of used that vehicle to create traffic towards the forums. Even some of the development work that's taken place over the years has seen that you can send an email to the forum and it will automatically populate so people then don't have to go to sort of a couple of places to do that.

Karen Moloney: Yeah, so what tools do you use for that? Is that on, is that part of Moodle or is it on something else?

Kim Sherwin: Yeah, so something we actually developed in house. We've had forums for very many years of Arup, and the technology has served its purpose over the years. It got a little bit archaic at one point, so we've explored using Yammer as the forums but actually people found that they liked the old forums, just in terms of functionality and being able to follow threads as well. You know, you're trying Yammer, it didn't work, how we sort of use the information, so we've actually reverted back to the forums and just done some developmental work to make

sure that we're providing an experience that's contemporary, is mobile friendly and so forth, so ongoing evolution, but we found some really critical things that people need to have access to and need to be able to do in order for them to be successful.

Karen Moloney: Yeah, that's a really interesting point actually 'cause I'm part of quite a few technical forums myself – I'm a closet geek - but I just find that they're all very like, none of them are pretty, but they're extremely functional, and I think it's something to bear in mind. I think in our industry we again sometimes get lost in the whistles and bells of tools, that ultimately don't always serve us very well.

You're actually not from an L&D background, so can you just tell us a little bit about your previous experience and that of your team in terms of skill sets and how you support the networks?

Kim Sherwin: Yeah, so I'm a librarian by trade and I joined Arup almost eight years ago now, and one of the really great things about Arup is the investment it makes in its people, but also the opportunity that it therefore creates. So I was a librarian for around five years and then an opportunity came up for me to lead Arup University which for me is, was absolutely amazing. To come from the background that I had to now have the opportunity that I do, on a day to day basis has been quite something for me. It's obviously a steep learning curve but I've loved every minute. Then in terms of my team, we've grown over the years. When I first started in the team, there was two and a half of us, and now we've gone up to 16 in the team, so we've grown and we've diversified the skill sets.

We're kind of set up around four primary functions, so ask, share, learn and explore. Just to sort of briefly to run through those - so the ask function is our library team who do research for the business, so it's not a traditional library service, and they support the business with project work and keeping current and sort of the market insight. We have share, which is our Skills Network, so knowledge sharing, which I've largely talked about today. We have learning, which is both technical learning through our Skills Networks, through to commercial effectiveness or often known as soft skills and leadership programs. Then explore, which is around research, so that's giving money to the business to go and generate new knowledge for Arup. And also foresight, which is future thinking, think tank that we have which also we do as a consulting service.

Michelle Ockers: Okay, so Kim, even the formal learning is done in partnership with the Skills Network, they're tightly bound to the work that Arup does and you will consult with them and be guided by them and work with them around your formal learning - that's right, isn't it?

Kim Sherwin: Absolutely, yes, so both informal and formal learning, and we use the Skills Networks because they straddle our businesses and our markets, and it's where our technical skills sit, it's really important that we work very, very closely with our Skills Networks. Some of our other formal learning around leadership programs and such like, not necessarily run through our Skills Networks but

there is a component there. How Arup University operates is we enable the business to do learning, and we will support the technology side and the diagnosis, if you will, but we leave the actual design of the learning to the subject matter experts because we're so broad in terms of our disciplines, we couldn't possibly have all of the knowledge around concrete or fire or structures within our team, so it's a real partnership model that we have.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah, fantastic, it must actually be really nice to be clear on who your partners are and what the model is to engage with them.

Kim Sherwin: Absolutely, and people just are so passionate about learning and development to this organisation, we often have to sort of calm them down a little bit because they just wanted to create so much learning because they're all so generous in sharing knowledge and helping up-skill more junior staff, so it's quite a nice problem to have. Sometimes, it does cause some challenges and people might get them bogged down in project work which is totally fine or get a bit too excited, but it's a really good problem to have.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah, I think most people listening to this podcast haven't had that problem.

Karen Moloney: It's like the Holy Grail.

That model of peer to peer learning and using the Skills Network obviously works very well at Arup. How do you determine if a network is adding value to the organisation? Are there any metrics or form of reporting on network activity that take place?

Kim Sherwin: We're very organic in that sense as well, so we obviously have usage and participation rates that we collect from the various programs, but it's also, when we design what learning we're going to do, it has to be outcomes driven and for a purpose, not just learning for learning's sake. We try and do quite a lot of upfront work to make sure that it's going to be valuable, questioning whether it's worth sending people to travel or if it's better to do in an online format. Then really, it's a lot of anecdotal, we always obviously do feedback surveys after an event, and then sort of do it that way rather than formal metrics and then we find that if it's, you know, there's uptight, great, if not, then we just don't do it.

We try and have a very light model where we're not investing too hard in one area. We'll sort of try and pilot something. If it doesn't work, oh well, we tried it. If it does work, great, now what can we do to add value in that particular area?

Karen Moloney: Okay, so what have been the biggest things that you've learned, like your own learnings from being involved in supporting the Skills Networks?

Kim Sherwin: Probably my biggest learning has been influence and patience. Influence in the sense that we're a very people based organisation and we need to make sure

that Arup University is seen as valuable and making a real difference, so we have very many conversations with people to check in to make sure that we're doing the right things. That's also compounded by not having everybody in the same office and having to do that geographically as well.

Then I think, patience is because obviously we're at the mercy of the market as well. Sometimes we want to drive things a bit faster but perhaps, you know, there's too much project work which means that other stuff might take a slightly backseat. Also, we're trying to take along a lot of disciplines and a lot of skillsets, so we can't offer the generic approach. Sometimes, you know, I have to temper my enthusiasm in terms of pacing the fun, which it can be frustrating 'cause we just like to get stuff done, but at the same time, we're here to support the business, we're not the business in itself, so we just have to exercise a bit of restraint and patience.

Karen Moloney: I can relate to you there, I think I had an employee appraisal a few years ago, I think this old manager described me as overzealous, I think, when it came to learning, I was like-

Michelle Ockers: Don't know how to pace the fun, Karen.

Karen Moloney: I don't know, don't know.

We're quite a practical podcast, so we're going to help people try new things, so if anybody listening is keen to do more with Skills Networks, Communities of Practice, what be your key take away tips to help them get started, because you've been running your networks for quite a while now, if you could go back and do that again, what would you do differently?

Kim Sherwin: I think it's being able to listen to what the business needs and not just assume because you've got the technical expertise from your own background, you need to be offering something that's relevant and not just making it a tick box exercise because that's what you think needs to happen. I've learned some compromise skills along the way, and in terms of, we're not the business in itself, so it's being, making sure that you're listening and that you're doing things and that you build up credibility as well.

As I've said many times on this podcast, we're a very people-based organisation and you sort of almost live and die by your projects, so we also need to have that mindset and operate as the business operates as well.

Karen Moloney: Absolutely.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah, when I think about the list of things that you've included in the responses to the last two questions, it's really interesting, Kim. You've spoken about influence, patience, compromise, credibility. These are almost independent of whether you're using Skills Networks or not. Skills for any learning professional

to work on, to build relationships with the business and have an impact with whatever approach they're using, would you agree with that?

Kim Sherwin: I think so, yeah, and to be patient with all of them as well because influence doesn't just happen with one telephone call or one coffee. Also we operate in a consulting environment, so we need to be consultative as well and you have to have some give and take in the relationship and keep working at it, consulting never ends is what I tell my team, so it's kind of how we operate.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah, yeah, and I guess beyond that, in regards specifically to setting up Communities of Practice, do you have any tips for anyone specifically around Communities of Practice as an approach to learning and getting them started in your organisation?

Kim Sherwin: I think it's, I'd definitely recommend people get outside their own organisation and understand what others are doing and where their opportunities, pitfalls, challenges have been, because often we try and fix everything ourselves and I think there's a lot to be leveraged from a community, a community of practice amongst ourselves. I also think, don't base it around just tools. I think it's very much at Arup, what I've learned is that it's about behaviour and it's about, you know, knowledge sharing and encouragement rather than, you know, slapping a new tool on somebody and then go use and expect it to fix the problems because the tool for me is the enabler, it's very much the people side of things that's really key.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah, absolutely, and I think your suggestion there that we need to have the experience ourselves, of being part of communities and understanding what that feels like and what motivates us and maybe what gets in the way in order to help other people develop those behaviours, practices and habits, to effectively engage in the community is really important.

Thank you for all of that hard-won wisdom that you've just shared with people.

We've got one final question we like to ask of all our guests, could you share with us the biggest thing you do for your own professional development?

Kim Sherwin: The biggest thing I probably do is to try and challenge myself and make myself feel a bit uncomfortable. So this year, what I've decided to do is to stand as a Director on a board of a professional association. I think I can add a lot to it from a different perspective, having moved out of one role into another in a commercial environment. For me, this is an opportunity to I guess flex that uncomfortableness and get out there and see what I can learn and, you know, nobody is going to die if you do something, usually, in most professions anyway, so it's just about getting over your fears and giving things a go.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah, so stretching yourself in your ways. Fantastic. Thank you for that. We're going to include a link to your LinkedIn profile, if anyone would like to get in

touch with you to find out more about the topics you've generously shared with us in today's episode. Thank you so much for sharing your work and your insights around Skills Networks and Arup University with us.

Kim Sherwin: My pleasure, thank you for having me.

Michelle Ockers: Thank you also to our listeners. If you are finding Learning Uncut valuable, can you please take a moment to rate the podcast and leave a review comment. Karen and I are really keen, along with Amanda, to ensure that as many people as possible know about Learning Uncut and have the possibility to learn from the work and experience of our guests, so that would be really helpful. Thank you.