Celebrating the 40th Anniversary of the McMaster World Congress

An interview with Dr. Nick Bontis by Kellie Rabak

KR: First off, congratulations on this wonderful milestone. Why is the MWC such an important event for the faculty?

NB: We are proud of the MWC because it is the longest-running, student-organized business conference in Canada. The first conference took place in 1978 and its original purpose was to provide students with an opportunity to socialize with each other and network with local business professionals. Fast-forward 40 years and the event still serves the same purpose. Most other business schools in Canada have since followed our lead and now host their own student conferences each year.

KR: I understand the MWC was originally targeted to MBA students. How did that happen?

NB: The MBA program at McMaster was introduced in 1968 with the co-op stream launching in 1973. The program’s unique differentiator was a focus on experiential learning. The faculty supported the launch of the MWC as a way for our MBA students to experience the design and implementation of a real conference event with all of the associated risks of finding sponsors, attracting revenue, and managing expenses.

KR: Does this mean that the conference funds itself?

NB: For the first 15 years, the event was funded by student fees and donations from sponsors with mostly MBA students in attendance. In 1995, the location of the event moved downtown to the Hamilton Convention Centre. The conference was repositioned as a global academic summit. Every few years we would change the theme depending on what was “hot” at the time. We used to host over 500 academic researchers each year from all over the world on topics such as entrepreneurship, innovation, intellectual capital, corporate governance and strategic business valuation. This became a large promotional event for the school.

KR: When did you personally get involved with the MWC?

NB: I was actually an academic attendee in 1996 while I was still finishing off my doctoral studies at Western. I remember driving down the highway from London to Hamilton and presenting my research in the convention centre downtown. It was my first time I met with academic colleagues from McMaster and two years later, I ended up accepting a job offer to start my career at DeGroote. So yes, the MWC has an important place in my heart.
**KR:** How has the conference changed since you started getting involved as a faculty advisor?

**NB:** This will be my 20th anniversary as a faculty advisor for the MWC. One of my fondest memories was in 2001 when we hosted an academic conference on e-commerce with my colleagues Milena Head and Chris Bart, right in the middle of the dot-com boom! We generated over $200,000 in revenue that year which is still the all-time record. I would estimate that over the last 20 years since I’ve been involved, the MWC has generated over $2 million in business. Five years ago, we moved the conference back to main campus to leverage the university student centre and CIBC Hall. Nowadays, the MWC attracts undergraduate students from DeGroote, business students from Mohawk and Redeemer as well as local high school students, and there is no registration fee at all. We are proud of the fact that we have accumulated a positive cash position with the MWC that allows us to provide the conference free of charge, which is a big win for everyone.

**KR:** I understand the conference themes continue to evolve. How do you decide what the focus should be?

**NB:** It’s quite simple actually. I ask the students each year what they want to learn more about and that becomes the theme for next year. The last few conferences we have focused on: Triple Bottom Line, Local Start-Ups, and Sports Management. In 2019, we are proud to present a high-profile list of speakers on the topic of Blockchain. As we all know, the blockchain is an undeniably ingenious invention – the brainchild of a person or group of people known by the pseudonym, Satoshi Nakamoto. It has since evolved into something greater that will significantly disrupt many business and industries.

**KR:** How have your student co-chairs fared over the years?

**NB:** To tell you the truth, it’s like a baptism of fire. As soon as the conference is done, we start planning for next year’s event. My job is to interview and select next year’s co-chairs and I typically do that within weeks of the close of the conference. I meet with the students every two weeks all year long and mentor them on the commercial side of the conference. I provide the continuity from year to year. Ultimately, the students must quickly learn about all of the functions: operations, marketing, finance, accounting, speaker recruitment, sponsorship recruitment and social media. It’s a real business with contracts, revenues and expenses and the objective is to break-even. After 20 years of doing this, I have kept some extra money in the MWC bank account for emergencies, but if we break-even in each year, we should be able to celebrate another 40 years of this event.

**KR:** Any last comments you would like to share?

**NB:** The greatest gift I receive from working on the MWC is developing deep relationships with the student co-chairs. They become part of my family and I love to see how they thrive after graduation. They go on to wonderful careers and I’ve been to some of their weddings, and
children’s birthday parties. Most of them come to visit me on campus now and then when they are recruiting the next generation of students. It’s been wonderful.

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For information on the McMaster World Congress, visit http://worldcongress.mcmaster.ca. This year’s theme is Blockchain Technology and the conference takes place on January 31 – February 1, 2019. The registration fee is free for alumni and members of the community.