

Windows to the soul

01/17/2006

By Diana Bagnall

Anne Kirah's lack of computer smarts is a distinct advantage in her role as Microsoft's chief anthropologist, maintaining a human link with the machines. Diana Bagnall reports.



Anne Kirah was six, and a Chinese-speaker, when her globe-trotting parents first took her back to the United States. "It was very traumatic for me. It wasn't the colour of my skin, it was suddenly that other kids were making fun, they were making Chink jokes, and I remember running home thinking that they were talking about me. I had to be sat down and have it explained – 'you're not Chinese'. That was one of the most heart-wrenching moments of my life. I remember it, this moment. I remember the Mary Jane shoes I had on my feet, and the white anklet socks. I remember every detail of what I had on. It was just a bizarre experience, but in that sense I was destined to end up where I did."

Kirah is pouring white tea into pretty little US Naval Academy teacups given to her by her maternal grandfather, the WASP admiral (as opposed to her paternal grandfather, the Polish immigrant New York taxi driver). She's flown back into Paris that morning, having cut short an Australian research trip to join her boss, Microsoft chairman Bill Gates, in a presentation to a conference of European technology bigwigs at the George V hotel. Her fifth-floor apartment in the funky 17th arrondissement is a shambles, her friendly tradesman having suspended major renovations for a vacation. She's a little unhinged in the way one is after travelling halfway around the world non-stop. All it takes is a whiff of tiger balm to hit her olfactory glands and she's straight back to her nursery school in Taipei and her Asian childhood.

"I really didn't come back to the States [to live] until I was about 12 or 13, and I knew I was just very different. I didn't know how to express it or what was wrong. I felt out of place," she tells me. Over the next two hours, we talk about how from such beginnings she has made a life and a career out of being a foreigner. We speak in English, though she occasionally pauses to mentally translate a thought from Norwegian, the language of the country she adopted as a young adult. She answers her phone in French. She also speaks Mandarin and Japanese, and the Scandinavian cousin tongues.

Kirah, 45, is an anthropologist – her destiny, as she puts it. The field skills she honed in places like Tibet and immigration centres in Norway ("everybody under the sun is calling themselves an ethnographer today but there is a skill set ...") are now used in the service of perhaps the greatest cultural leveller of all time, information technology. She was the first anthropologist Microsoft hired back in 1999. Intel, L'Oreal and Proctor & Gamble are among the other corporations which have cottoned on to the value of anthropologists, but Microsoft was an early adopter. As Kirah tells it, it was one of those intuitive appointments which has led places no one, least of all her, could have foreseen.


At that time, her own computing skills were, to put it politely, rudimentary – "I'm sure I was the last person to adopt email; I think I was forced to sign up by some professor at the university" – and she had only scant knowledge of what exactly it was that the Seattle-based software developer did. These days she's as dependent on her laptop as any globe-trotting executive, though somewhat less mesmerised by its tricks than many ("I break them awfully quick, because I don't have a clue how to deal with them"). Her brief, as the leader of a team of eight anthropologists now on Microsoft's books, is to develop field and laboratory research, both within the US and internationally, "intended to influence current and future Microsoft product, software and service designs to improve humans' interaction with technology". She calls it, more simply, getting real.

She recalls, soon after she joined Microsoft, dropping into a conversation between developers about whether they should reward participants in a research trial with eight (computer) mice or six. In those days, she explains, people had one computer. Some people had the dead computer and a second computer, but that was unusual. "And I'm like, 'Wait a second, do I hear you guys right? You think normal people have ...?' They did. She set them right, and continues to do so. "The day I can't see those kinds of things, they should fire me."



About a year after Kirah joined Microsoft, Windows XP went into its final beta testing phase for the consumer product. She put up and won a case for expanding the test pool beyond the IT hubs of Seattle and San Francisco. Using standard anthropological methodology, she recruited 40 families from five cities across the US. A special help desk was set up. And the fun began. "The calls started coming in from my families, and apparently they were showstoppers. People saying, 'I can't use this machine, it doesn't work, I can't do this' ... and they were driving the help desk people mad. And my manager is screaming, 'Anne, where did you find these people, what's wrong with them? You know, we have 1000 people doing the same beta testing and we haven't had any of these complaints.' And after trying to catch my breath, and figure out a good answer – because I really believed in what I was doing – I asked him to go back and check if they were using them at home. The answer was yes.

"I started thinking, well, what are their professions? And they were all, 99.9% of them, IT pros who used their computer at home. Well, you have to wonder how you get to be on a beta [test]. Do you think your average Joe even knows what a beta is, let alone how to find the website through

 Microsoft.com which shows you how you can become a beta tester? So I realised the big mistake was that all these other people were techno-hobbyists ... [It's like people who muck around with cars], you wanna figure out what's wrong with it: it takes you four hours, but you're so excited that you found the solution, and you drive off. Yet if it's me, getting in a car and finding it doesn't work, I'll get upset and call the mechanic. All I care about is getting the car going so I can drive somewhere.

"Same with computers. The techno-hobbyists didn't lodge the problem because they figured it out. The people who couldn't figure it out called and lodged it as a problem. And that's normal behaviour ... So that was a huge win of understanding the gap between understanding what was going on within the walls at Microsoft and outside. [As a result], we had people making video clips, training the help desk people; we created help desk books to make this work and get the feedback into the right places and to impact product development."

At the Windows XP launch, a couple in their mid-70s, one of her 40 beta-tester families, talked about what the technology meant to them. "What was emotional for me was the developers who came up to me afterwards, with tears in their eyes, and said how important for them to realise that they were building for real people. That was a powerful moment." The shift in the past five or six years towards focusing on people is exemplified, she believes, by Microsoft's ad campaign, "your potential, our passion". "I first saw that ad in the Paris Metro on one of the first weeks I was here, and I just burst into tears because here I am dreaming my life, too."

She certainly is. Kirah moved from Seattle to Paris last February. Shortly before that, she'd divorced and in the spirit of starting again, renamed herself (her married name was Kiel). At first she wanted to be called Anne Twinkle. She explains, "I got very ill a few years back and lay for a month in Paris with a view of the Eiffel tower ... [It] twinkles on the hour every hour and I would wait for that; it got me through those days ... I had time to think about my life and make changes and I'm grateful for this. But you can't call yourself Anne Twinkle. Nobody would be humoured by it and, if anything, they'd think the woman is absolutely insane."

"I knew that Kirah meant twinkle in Japanese, so I got my wish; it sounds nice. In Russian, it means woman warrior – a kind of mythological thing – and I can't even repeat what it means in Farsi, it's such a bad word. My best friend in Norway was together with an Iranian and he told me, are you crazy? ... But I decided to stick with it, because it was about me, not about all the people who speak Farsi in the world." When among Farsi speakers, she pronounces her name Kyrar. Only anthropologists would care, she tells me. I disagree. Her story tells of a woman for whom moving across cultures is second nature and yet who remains profoundly respectful of borders. She's crossed enough.

Kirah's peripatetic Asian childhood ended when it was time for her to start high school. Her parents moved to Michigan, but she never settled properly in the US. "My parents were very good. They got me involved in another language and I spent a summer abroad in France as an exchange student. When I was abroad, I was happy, and when I was at home, I wasn't." She graduated from a Quaker boarding school in Ohio, and left to hitchhike around Europe for a year. Then she worked out how to stay. She got a grant to study the sociology of education in Norway. "Everybody said, pick a strange subject and a strange country." Norway? "We all like to psychoanalyse ourselves and I did my share of that, too," she says. "It was pretty obvious that I would pick a place where roots were very important, and I did."

In her second year of university, she needed a minor subject. Someone told her, "Study anthropology, it's easy and you'll get there real quick." She still remembers her first class, her first teacher. "I felt like he was speaking to me. What he said, over and over, was that when you are an anthropologist, you must study people from their perspective and not your own. I felt that was my life because I was constantly in the position of understanding what it was like to be a foreigner, and also understand the other culture. After that, I didn't look back."

She earned an advanced graduate degree in social and cultural anthropology in Oslo, married a Norwegian economist, and had two daughters. In the mid-'90s, she returned to the US to do further training in clinical psychology, a skill she felt she lacked when she was working with the children of refugees and immigrants, many of them African and Turkish. She went to Seattle, to the University of Washington.

She may well have stayed in academia had the world's leading aircraft manufacturer, Boeing, not come searching for an intern researcher in the psychology department. The company wasn't looking for an anthropologist, she says, but she thought, "Wait a minute, we could do some kind of anthropology here."

Boeing's research project involved understanding the effect of long-distance flights on passengers, pilots and flight attendants. It wanted someone with a basis in number-crunching (quantitative surveys) who could also do in-depth interviews (qualitative research) on planes going around the world. "That was like a haven for me," she says. (We laugh at how improbable that sounds to most bedraggled long-haul travellers. Yet as we speak, she's trying fruitlessly to contact her Venice-based boyfriend, a flight attendant, whose flight to Asia has crossed over with her flight back from Australia. Her moonlighting carpenter is also a flight attendant. Air travel, it seems, is built into her life. "My parents will tell you that I learned to walk on a plane," she says with a grin.)

She says she can't discuss the results of the Boeing project but someone talked, because Microsoft heard about her and called her in for an interview. "My first response was, 'I don't think so. I don't even know what you do'." And you lived in Seattle? I ask incredulously. "I knew Microsoft was this big weird thing that did chips." (They don't do chips.) "In my mind it was this kind of funky place. I was just so non-technological. I grew up in an academic family and, quite frankly, my family were not particularly interested in anything outside of academia. I didn't even know there was a corporate world out there. It was like, ooh, bankers, ooh."

But as it turns out, the speed of the corporate world, and its need for quick results, suits her personality. No one's ever going to mistake Kirah for a geek (her clothes are too art school, her conversation lively and intelligible), and she remains a Luddite at heart – "I can't tell you how often I forget the basics," she says, riffling around in her as-yet-unpacked luggage for a forgotten plug. But her conviction that a technology company needs to understand how people live as much as how they arrange their computer desktop now tangibly influences the process of product design.

Microsoft's anthropology program has both reactive and proactive drivers, she explains. A reactive study, for example, might investigate why a certain product isn't selling well in a particular market. "For example, in Japan we find out that pushing somebody for a conversation is the rudest form of communication possible, so instant messenger doesn't work, but they will use SMS back and forth." Proactive studies allow her teams to explore what people in different countries are doing in their everyday lives, their aspirations and motivations, what makes them tick. "We throw away the questionnaires and just go meet the people."

Late last year, Kirah and her team were in Australia for the first time. They followed eight families at different life stages, four each in Melbourne and Sydney, over three weeks. Some of her observations, still in raw form, seem banal and obvious, others are puzzling, some are quite startling – like the man who wanted to go on a diet, and decided to use his phone to photograph everything he ate, and post them on his blog. "I thought it was hysterical." She comments on the high levels of trust between people in Australia, and on the commitment Australians have to reducing stress in their lives. "Dematerialisation," she noted.

What she's looking for are the stories that others miss, the seeds of new ways of living. Her teams exploit existing social networks, not the focus groups of random individuals favoured by market researchers. "If you have family members they sit there and argue back and forth – 'That's not true, you don't really do that, I've seen you spend 20 hours online not 10'. The reality isn't what's important, it's the perception that's important."

The data harvested is used to stimulate innovation and creativity in the instant messenger, mobile and internet spaces, as she calls them. It feeds in at the beginning of the research design process: research designers think up "future scenarios", the program managers and product planners come on board, and then the building begins; more data is fed in, and the process continues. In participatory design projects, running in the US, Spain, the Netherlands, Italy, Japan and Korea, she asks people to tell her a story by making a poster from pictures they take with a Polaroid camera, and secondly, to build something important to them. She found, for example, that US participants of all ages put themselves right in the middle of their poster (or story), while almost everyone in all other cultures put themselves on the outside looking in, and their family and friends in the centre. "It blew me away. I'd love to write a paper on that, but I don't have time right now." Maybe Seattle has staked a deeper claim on the girl than she knows, even though she hangs her chandelier in Paris. ¹

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