Can you please describe what a CKN is?
The first Collaborative Knowledge Networks is 2,000 years old and was started in Jerusalem by a carpenter, so Christianity has all the characteristics. It has a charismatic leader who creates something totally new which has never been there before which, in the beginning, is not easily accepted by its environment, but is able to collect a group of very motivated, dedicated disciples around him and, in the end, it totally changes the way how the environment behaves. Now examples of today are the World Wide Web, or Linux, which both of them also started outside of conventional organizations, outside of hierarchies, and in the end totally turned around the environment.

What are the characteristics of a CKN and what are the benefits?
Characteristics are it is outside of conventional organization; it is a meritocracy, which means it does not respect conventional hierarchies very much. In the end, it turns out a tremendous benefit and people join it because they believe in what they are doing and not because they want to get paid immediately for what they are doing.

You mentioned that the World Wide Web is a collaborative network of today; can you briefly describe how that fits in?
Yes, that fits in perfectly. I was really happy because I was at MIT lab for Computer Science when Tim Berners-Lee created the world wide web and he was and still is a very charismatic, dedicated leader who started this thing not because he wanted to get rich, but because he believed in a new idea and he started this at CERN, which is a physics organization, so creating something like the world wide web was really not very easy, not very natural for an organization like CERN, but very quickly, he got the group of very motivated, dedicated people around himself and other CERN innovators, and then a group of students and then it spread outside of CERN and it took 1, 2, 3, 4 (1 to 4) years. Now if you look back, Christianity took 200 years and today those CKN ideas, thanks to the internet, it takes just a couple of months to years to spread out.
Do you believe that these CKNs have a large benefit for large, multi-national corporations these days, and if so, how would one go about implementing or encouraging one of these to develop in their environment?

I think this links in very nicely with work on communication that, for example, people like Tom Allen at MIT have been doing for 20-30 years, which means again that you have people talking with each other. That you help to foster a dialog on all hierarchical levels as it is happening still today, quite frequently in corporations where it goes up the hierarchy and then down the hierarchy in another department, but that you have a very open dialog that you try to encourage creative ideas on all levels. For example, on the marketing side, Chrysler is using a game called YaYa which actually happens to be a spin off of Deloitte Consulting, which creates a virtual community of people that want to play with exploring Chrysler cars and this is a very small idea, very creative idea, but it’s again applying those CKN concepts of creating a virtual community of people interested in cars.

You just spoke about a virtual community, what is the difference between a virtual community and a collaborative knowledge network?

To put it very simply, every collaborative knowledge network is a community and these days, because it’s using the internet to communicate, it is a virtual community. But not every virtual community is a collaborative knowledge network because the way how I define collaborative knowledge network, those are people which are intrinsically motivated to share a common vision. So, just to get together on the web to flame about Amazon or Wal-Mart or whatever, that’s a virtual community. But I wouldn’t call this a CKN. Now, to take a negative example, if you look at Al-Quaida, it has all the characteristics of a CKN. It’s a group of very dedicated people that work together, that share a vision towards a common goal. Now there is one distinguishing characteristic compared to a positive CKN: You cannot get out easily.

What functional areas stand to benefit most from these collaborative knowledge networks within a corporation?

In my opinion it’s the whole value chain. And this starts with collaborative product design to come up with new product ideas if you can steal those ideas from the customer, that’s the best idea. Car companies are actually doing this. This YaYa example is very primitive, but still it taps into what clients want and if you look at those very creative cars that cater to the generation of the twenty-something, which with my somewhat advanced age, I don’t like those cars, but those cars don’t have to appeal to everybody, but to a very small, dedicated group and if the group is big enough, its more than enough to sell, to make high profit on those creative ideas. So, new product design is certainly one main area for those CKNs.

What about when you expand the CKN beyond an organization into a sort of an industry association or a product research community, are there issues with security?

Yes, you’re absolutely right. Security is one of the main issues because particularly if you sponsor a CKN with the goal of creating a new product and you let in people from the outside, who owns intellectual property rights? I’ve actually been part of a CKN where some consulting companies got together to work on the area of knowledge management and the issue of intellectual property rights was, I think, one which we weren’t able to successfully solve 100%.
It created some really useful thought leadership work but I think, in the end, that was one of the main issues. So, it’s certainly easier if it’s within one organization or at least, if you have some industry associations, they shouldn’t compete.

To set up a CKN it seems that the potential membership are going to have to share some common background or common knowledge level or common language to be able to communicate and express their ideas. Is that necessary and to what extent do you need that before you can set up a CKN?
I think what is crucial is the shared value system. And if you look at Linux or at the World Wide Web, we had such a shared value system because the community of the early email or internet users had a very clear value system, which was a meritocracy. There you had your virtual personality, right along which was clearly defined, with all of those cryptic abbreviations, where you had to build up trust slowly by contributing, where you lost it very quickly if you didn’t behave according to the rules. But in companies, CKNs also can work if the value system of the company is strong enough.

What do you see as the future of CKNs? Where do you think their next big leaps and bounds are going to be taken?
I think this whole science of CKNs is just about to emerge – it’s in a very early stage and, right now, we are still researching how we can identify best those CKNs. What really are the clear criteria that define such a CKN and how do we measure their success. Because, it’s very hard, it’s quite a fuzzy area, and in the end we need to show a clear return on investment if you want these principles to succeed in a corporate environment.

What role do you see technology playing in a CKN going forward and are there areas that still need to be developed?
I think, foremost, this is about people. It’s a cultural thing where you need to establish this culture of trust, this meritocracy and this sharing of knowledge. That’s absolutely crucial. That said, of course technology’s the great enabler and we don’t want great ideas to take a couple of hundred years like Christianity and if you use the internet the right way, we can get a great idea spread out in a couple of months so, I would say, it’s simple things like email, which is great to keep in touch globally because it’s as it occurs in nature.

Well thank you very much. I want to thank you on behalf of myself and the Center for Digital Strategies and Tuck.

Thank you very much. It was great talking to you