

## **Krista Pawley – "Unlocking Potential: The Power of Questions and Inclusion in the Digital Age"**

Host: Maggie John

### **Overview:**

In this episode, Krista Pawley joins us to discuss how digital platforms can remove barriers and create greater access to opportunities for students. Krista Pawley is a tri-sector leader who connects people and organizations across 56+ countries to catalyze sustainable, inclusive impact. She co-founded Wavemakers, the first national Work-Integrated Learning program using Virtual Reality, and founded Imperative Impact. Pawley shares her thoughts on how digital platforms like Wavemakers can equip students with vital skills for a rapidly changing job market by removing barriers to meaningful work experiences.

### **Highlights from our conversation include:**

1. Through tools like virtual reality and partnerships with equity-deserving communities, Wavemakers creates inclusive and welcoming environments, ensuring that students can bring their whole selves into their experiences.
2. By designing digital tools with a focus on belonging and inclusion, Wavemakers harnesses technology to create opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach, removing geographical and financial barriers.

### **MAGGIE:**

We are live again here at Magnet Network Live. I'm your host, Maggie John, and I'm now joined by Krista Pawley. She is a tri-sector leader who connects public, private, and social sectors with a focus on digital transformation, inclusive governance, and impact. Through WaveMakers, she supports students in accessing work-integrated learning opportunities, preparing them for the future of work by leveraging virtual

reality and digital tools. She has worked with global organizations and has been instrumental in designing inclusive experiences for diverse stakeholders. Welcome Krista.

**KRISTA:**

Thank you so much. It's great to be here.

**MAGGIE:**

What's your biggest takeaway today so far? KRISTA: Oh, my goodness. Ask more questions.

**MAGGIE:**

Tell me more. See how I did that?

**KRISTA:**

Yeah, I like that. Thank you. So great mirroring to you. It's interesting because it's something I believe in strongly. It's actually I teach a session in Wavemakers about asking questions because I believe it's a critical capability. And I just had the privilege of sitting in on a fireside with Vivienne Ming and her big thing was the importance of asking the critical questions. So when somebody at that level and who is just that brilliant has the same kind of point, I'm like, yeah, this is really what we need to do. And for me, it's such a critical point.

And I don't know if people realize, but we actually start decreasing the number of questions that we ask as of age four and that's terrifying to me. So being in a community here that has responsibility around our learning models and curricula development, really thinking about are we learning in ways that encourage questions or are we so focused on the answer that we're missing these big opportunities? So I've really loved listening to that being a call out and also kind of that theme of what might we unlock as a community if we asked really beautiful questions. I love that because I think one of the earlier arguments around AI was, will

it take away our critical thinking? Will it kind of just make us, you know, we plug it in because that's the answer. We plug it in.

And so I love the fact that so many people are challenging because you're not the first who said that. I believe Vivienne said that in this exact same chair, that we need to ask those critical questions and continue to challenge each other as we grow. That's so important.

Yes, and I'm going to do a little promo for an organization that's doing phenomenal work in this space. There's a group called Tech Stewardship. They came out of Engineers Without Borders. And actually today, they're launching a pilot around tech stewardship for AI. And I think they asked one of the most beautiful questions there is out there, which is, just because we can, does that mean we should? And I think that is such a critical question. And it applies not just to technology, but to our public policymakers, to our business leaders.

As we make these decisions, asking that question and thinking about, are we making decisions today that future generations are going to thank us for? And that, to me, is one of the beautiful questions. And the more we can be thinking about that, the more we can bring that stewardship mindset and bring that curiosity rather than making assumptions, I think it just opens up a world of possibility and an opportunity for us.

**Maggie:**

So good. All right, let's talk about WaveMakers. How can a digital platform like WaveMakers help students develop the skills needed to thrive in a rapidly changing job market?

**Krista:**

So when I talk about WaveMakers, everybody kind of gloms onto the fact it's like, ooh, virtual reality, that's really cool. Spoiler alert, it's not about the tech. The tech is the tool that solves the problem. And the problem was removing barriers to meaningful

work experiences for learners who otherwise wouldn't be able to access them. And so we have created a virtual reality experience, and we did that by working with partners across multiple equity-deserving communities. We didn't decide to work with just one community. We said, let's try to see if we can take on as much as possible and do that in a way that makes belonging an innate part of the experience. So at no point in time do we say, now you belong, and this is intentional for this group, and this is intentional for that group.

When you actually design for belonging at the core, you create experiences that are welcoming to everyone. And it's important for us to recognize: A, that most of us have multiple identities. I am a business leader. I am someone who loves to travel, who loves to cook. I'm a mom. I'm a social entrepreneur. I have all of these identities, and they are all true to me. Well, that's true for our students and our learners as well. So when we try to categorize them as a single thing, we're missing out on the whole of who they are. And I believe, and it's what we've looked to prove out, and I think we've been pretty successful with Wavemakers, is that if we design our digital tools and platforms with the intentionality of belonging and inclusion at the core, these can actually create deeply human experiences. And to give kind of voice to that, and I love talking about my students.

I have this amazing student who is from a rural community. She is a person with a disability. She uses a wheelchair. And she went through our program. At the end of our program, we do a virtual career fair. So we've got a virtual campus. And she came up to me at the end of the career fair and she'd met... We have employers in there from multiple different sectors all across Canada because we want students to open their aperture of what's possible. And she came up to me and she said, Krista, for the first time in my life, I feel seen for my ability and not my disability. And that, to me, speaks to the potential that we have when we leverage technologies with deep intention and design for inclusion, that we can create things that are otherwise would be impossible.

**MAGGIE:**

The intersectionalities of all of our lives play such a big role in the way that we see things. That's a great example. Talk to me about how you've seen that also just work in the work environment and in just businesses as well when people are seeing it holistically for who they are.

**KRISTA:**

Absolutely. And we know that the workplaces that recognize the whole human are able to, if I'm being really crass, are able to get the most value out of their talent. Because the reality is that we are whole humans and that we want to be able to work and contribute in ways that are valuable to us. Yes, financially, absolutely, but also on a values base. And to me, that's really critical.

We did a session earlier today, and a big thing that I'm arguing is that we are really good right now at measuring our debt. We know what that is to the penny. We don't measure what I think are our more valuable assets, which is our talent, our education, our health care, our safe communities, and our environment. And that plays into your question around what about how does this intersectionality show up in the workplace? It shows up in the way that those workplaces, and I would say those countries that recognize value and invest in those core assets are those that are actually going to prosper, not just on a quarter to quarter basis, but on a go forward basis, because it's going to make it easier to attract talent. You're going to have a culture that speaks to both your talent and then is expressed externally as well because your customers are going to see that it's going to increase their propensity to work with you. I mean we can go into how it impacts net promoter scores and all of the rest and there are countless tools like if people are wondering how do i do this go ask an accountant about a materiality assessment it's a great business tool I know so often we talk about this as DEI eye and it feels very soft and fuzzy, I come out of a corporate background.

Everything we do has to be sustainable financially, but it also has to be sustainable socially and environmentally. And I think that's where the opportunity exists when we

look at this intersectionality of identities, of priorities, and when we start to measure and view value in a way that is appropriate for the digital age. Because right now, frankly, we're still using industrial age antiquated models, and they just don't make sense.

### **MAGGIE:**

So let's talk about that. The role, what role does technology play in creating more inclusive work environments? And how can organizations ensure that digital tools support equity and belonging? Kind of what you were talking a little bit about.

### **KRISTA:**

Yeah. So again, I can use my student there as an example. She is so talented. And I mean, if we just took the identity of her being in a rural and remote community, the employers she had the opportunity to connect with never would have come to a career fair in her community. And so she never would have opened the aperture of different careers that were available to her because the reality is for so many of us as learners, we could only imagine being those things which we had already seen. And so that means that we're limiting our talent pool and we're leaving so much untapped. So that's a huge miss.

When it comes to being able to leverage technologies for inclusion, I look at this and say, okay, how might we use these to remove barriers? So when I use virtual reality, we use it in an intentional way to say, this is a way to remove geographic barriers. This is a way to remove financial barriers. This is a way to remove biases that come in when we see a person. And so people will say, well, how is this different from Zoom? Well, when you go on a Zoom call, even if you use a fake background, as soon as I see you, I've made assumptions about you. Yeah. But when you come in in a virtual world, we're all the same. I can't see where you are. I don't know what you look like. I'm going to judge you on the quality of your thinking, the quality of your character and how you show up. So that enables me to get to know you better and to really recognize your full value for companies. And we've been my whole team is virtual.

None of us work in the same space. I have people on three different continents. This kind of adoption of technology enables you to access talent wherever it is and wherever it wants to be. And I think that's also critical. So whether that means being able to access my student in a rural community or Indigenous talent in the north, I mean, I can go on about that, about why it is so critical that we create opportunities for Indigenous talent to stay in community. That's critical to social cohesion within those communities, and it's something that a lot of these learners want to be able to do and before technology really weren't able to do. So you can access that talent.

You have the ability to make opportunities available to a broader portion of the community than you can in the analog world. I was somebody as a student who didn't have a lot of resources. I came from very little means. I lived in a rooming house and split Mr. Noodles into two meals in a day. I share this because if I had been offered a phenomenal work-integrated learning co-op opportunity when I was in school in Toronto or Vancouver, Montreal, I wouldn't have been able to take it because I couldn't have afforded to travel. I couldn't have afforded rent. I couldn't have afforded the clothes that I would have needed to show up in those spaces. But by leveraging technologies like virtual reality, I'm able to provide access to that. I can talk about a whole bunch of other technologies as well.

I'm just focusing on VR, but there's potential in AI. There's potential in things like using digital tools in creative ways to actually create wellness. The Digital Wellness Hub is a center out of Columbia University, but the woman who leads it's here in Toronto, and they're doing phenomenal work leveraging technology to actually create mental wellness. And I think that I think we hear a lot about the downside of technology, and those are very real, and I do not want to ignore those. But I guess my challenge, especially to this community, knowing who we are, is that we have the opportunity to shape the positive and shape for the good. And that opportunity is huge. And so I'd encourage us to really wrap our arms around it and take it on.

**MAGGIE:**

Krista, thank you.

**KRISTA:**

My pleasure. Thank you.

**MAGGIE:**

Thank you for the work that you do as well. Thanks so much. That was Krista Pawley  
She is the co-founder of WaveMakers and co-chair of Excite.