



PROFILE CECILE PARIS

Sailing into the unknown

A CSIRO researcher thrives on risk and diverse points of view, writes **Cynthia Karena.**

CECILE PARIS is a woman who loves the adventure of going into the unknown and discovering new places. This is what drives her to go sailing and to do research.

Sailing has taught the senior language technology researcher at CSIRO's ICT Centre that you need to work as a team if you are going to get anywhere.

In 1994 she left the Information Sciences Institute research laboratory in Los Angeles after seven years because the team spirit was in tatters.

"I was on 'soft money' — we had to get grants to pay our salaries," Dr Paris, 46, says. "There was a huge funding problem and suddenly my collaborative environment was very competitive.

"It was very hard; I wanted to enjoy working with people (not compete with them). I left because I want to collaborate with people.

"I learned that there are politics everywhere and politics can interfere with the enjoyment of working with people.

"In the US there was more academic freedom in the past, where good ideas were accepted by granting agencies. Now they have agendas and this can affect where the research is going.

"The CSIRO is structured differently — we go in a national direction."

Encouraging people to work together is what Dr Paris finds inspiring about her manager at CSIRO, Ross Wilkinson. "He has strong principles and values. He is not only a very good researcher but I like and

respect him both as a friend and colleague."

Dr Paris also tries to behave according to her principles and values and to have integrity. "I try to support people and also try to ensure we have fun in our work and fun together."

After studying computer science at Berkeley University in California, Dr Paris studied artificial intelligence and natural language processing at Columbia University in New York, and in 1987 gained a PhD in computational linguistics.

She is interested in how people interact with computers and information, for example, when they use a search engine and want more than just a document.

"I look at language and take some things from conversational linguistics to help communication and make it as natural as possible. Human-to-human interaction is the model. How can I best adapt a system to a user, looking at their task and preferences? "Now information is everywhere and people are time-starved. It's really important to present information in a shape that is easily understood."

After working alone on her PhD for seven years at Columbia, Dr Paris wanted to work with people. "Initially, I found it hard to work with different types of personalities. I used to always work with people like me.

"It was a revelation when I realised that teams work the best with different types of people — some understand detail, others are visionaries. I've learned to be open to different skills and working across disciplines with people with different perspectives."

Mentoring PhD students, most from Macquarie University, adds to the mix of perspectives for Dr Paris. "It's exciting, they have great ideas. I am very excited about my work and they get excited at the same time. We look at interesting problems, brainstorming and investigating how to get better solutions. A member of staff, a software engineer, was excited by what we do here and is now doing his PhD."

A former student won the Most Distinguished Australian PhD Dissertation award (2001) for computer science in Australia and now works at the IBM research laboratory in Israel.

Her new PhD student will be working on ways to summarise emails. For example, when people come back from conferences and have 500 emails: "I'd love for my inbox to be summarised and know which messages need attention now," says Dr Paris. "Or to know where are we at in a discussion that has been going on while I'm away that took 15 emails to discuss. I want a summary of information. And which emails do I need to read in-depth?"

But, she says, research is not for everyone. "Sometimes you hit your head against a brick wall. There is no certainty; there is always a bit of risk.

"Because it's research, I don't know exactly how it will work out. Our industry partners need to know that we are working in the unknown. It also needs to fit in with our strategic direction."

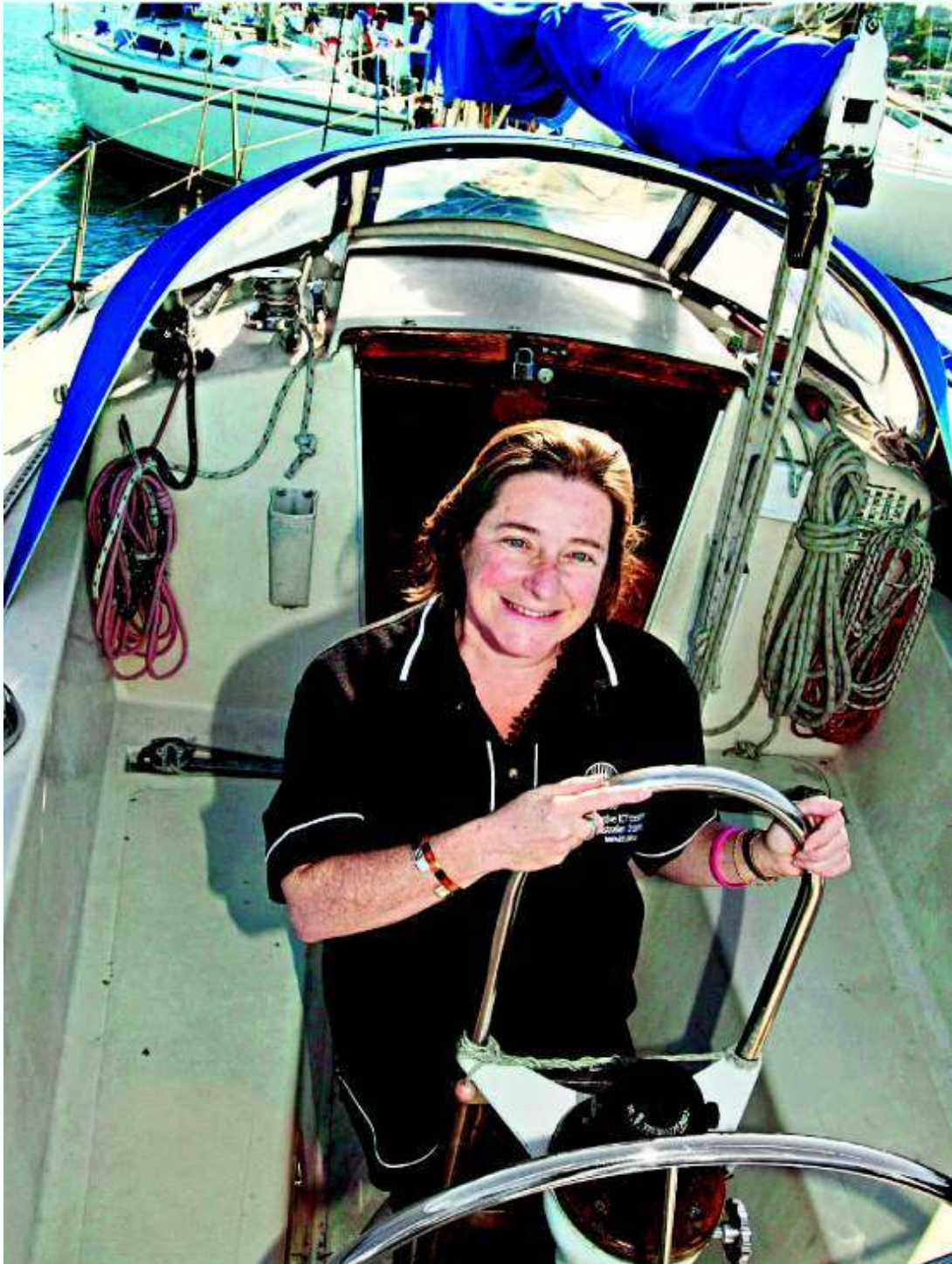
LINK

► ict.csiro.au/staff/Cecile.Paris



NEXT LESSONS

- Go into the unknown and discover new places.
- You need to work as a team if you are going to get anywhere.
- Support people in work, and have fun together.
- Teams work best with different types of people – different skills and different perspectives.
- Be excited about your work.



"I used to always work with people like me", says Dr Cecile Paris.

PICTURE: NARELLE AUTO