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Singer tunes up business

Tania de Jong helps companies and their staff find their voices

VERITY EDWARDS

TANIA de Jong loves to talk. And sing. And help disadvantaged people through her charities.

Excessive talking and singing can be a good thing, particularly when it comes to inspiring corporate Australia to find its voice.

"About 85 per cent of people have been told at some stage in their life they can't sing, so people, in a way, their voice is silenced," de Jong says. "My mission in life is to help people find their voice, unlock their potential."

"I want to change the world, one voice at a time."

De Jong may be right. Singing gives people confidence and makes most people happy. She says it also unlocks neural pathways and helps people become more creative.

Since taking up singing — after being told not to bother — de Jong found her voice and her confidence. She now uses singing in her corporate career, whether it be entertaining, encouraging people to sing with the disadvantaged for charity, or when talking to companies about innovation, risk aversion, technological disruption or creativity.

Her transition from singing to the corporate world began 27 years ago, when she founded Pot-Pourri, an opera, theatre, music group for corporate clients.

The group would write specific songs to suit the organisation,

from banks to finance to gynaecologists.

Chief executives began knocking on her door, leading her to an entrepreneurial career and to start her own advisory business on corporate creativity.

For de Jong, singing involves risk, and companies can't innovate unless they take risks and are more creative. She says businesses have always been interested in innovation, but Australian companies are risk averse compared with those in Israel, Singapore and northern Europe.

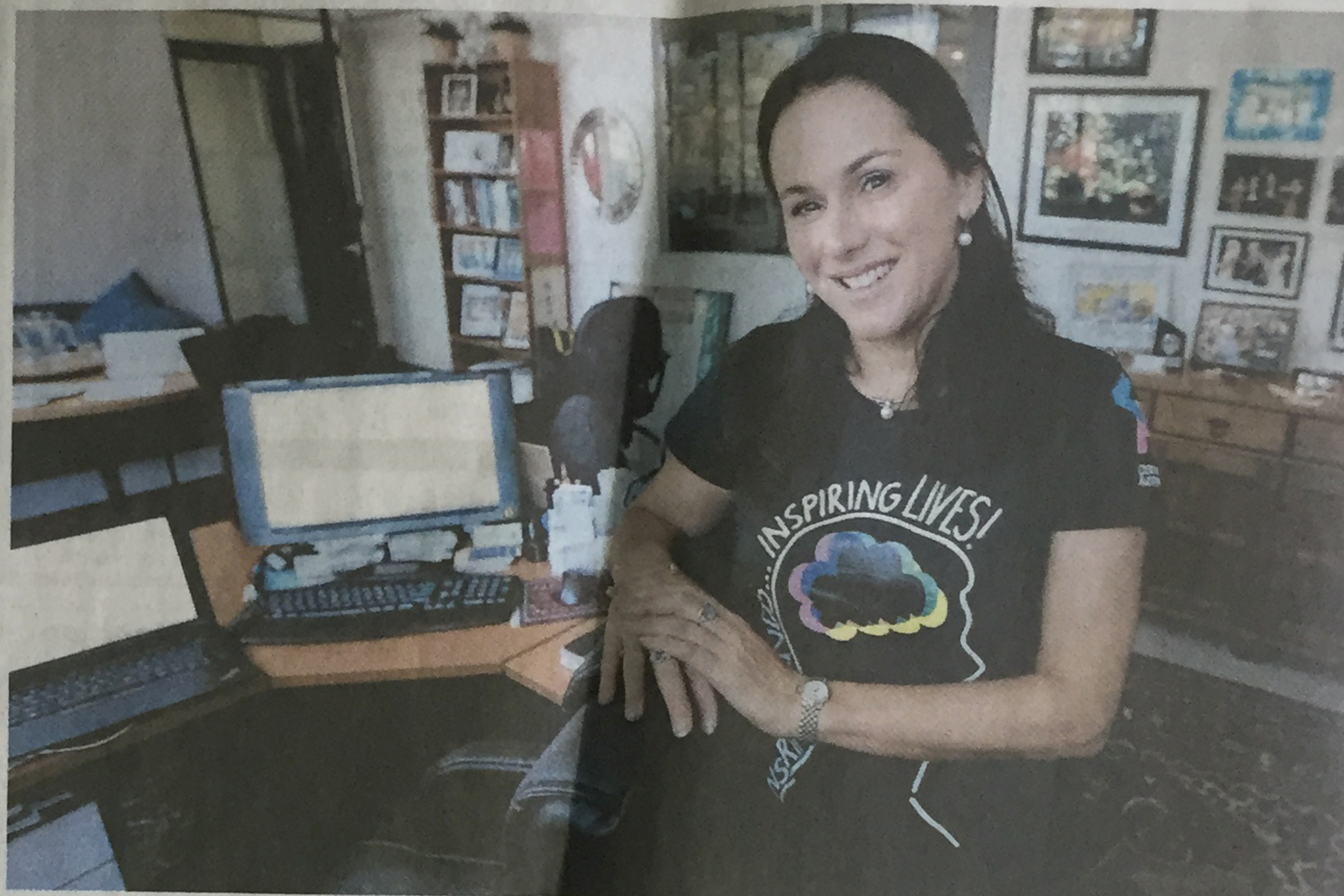
"I've been working with companies around capability and innovation, and a can-do attitude," she says. That includes encouraging people to sing in conference audiences or corporate groups.

"It's all about removing self-limiting belief," she says. "Literally in half an hour we can get one team singing four-part harmonies with actions. We're all creative."

De Jong says people often let criticisms or offhand comments permeate their lives, including thinking that they are not creative.

"We think creativity is something to do with the arts and I don't believe that it is," she says.

"I'm not asking if people are good at singing or dancing or fashion design. It's more so they come up with new ideas or problem solving. Creativity gets us into a more inventive neural pathway."



DAVID GERAGHTY

'Creativity gets us into a more inventive neural pathway,' says the Song Room founder Tania de Jong

The inspirational speaker has been involving business with charity for more than 15 years, when she founded the Song Room, a not-for-profit school-based program that provides music education to disadvantaged and low-income students at schools where there is no funding for specialist arts programs.

The program sends artists with teaching qualifications into schools for at least six months, providing an interactive learning environment that leaders hope will improve student outcomes.

The Song Room also provides funding to ensure arts programs continue in schools, mentoring for teachers and community engagement events for families, including concerts and performances.

"We're bringing music to disadvantaged schools, and participation in creative programs has been shown to improve literacy and numeracy," she says.

Through music and creativity

de Jong says young people naturally become more innovative, which means they are likelier to create their own jobs and be fearless when leaving school and looking for work.

The Song Room program has also led to the founding of Creativity Australia, where community choirs team professional people with those who are often less fortunate. The aim is to make people happier, healthier, smarter and more creative — and problem solve at the same time.

De Jong says participants can make a wish at the end of each weekly session, and the wishes are read out and solutions often found. It is where business connections and philanthropy help those who need it, through an interest in singing.

"It can be help with a resume, work or English lessons," she says.

"Hundreds of people have connected through jobs, skills; we've even had a marriage because

someone wished for a partner. At the end of the day people want to help each other but they don't know how."

Along with challenging people and companies to be more innovative and harness their creative energy, de Jong has been focusing recently on disruptive technology and how it affects business.

She says every business is affected by technology and workplaces are changing, whether through the use of mobile devices and people working from home, cloud computing, data security or improvements in manufacturing.

She says most businesses need to learn how to deal with technological disruption and innovate to ensure future viability.

"We need to be more innovative, and I don't mean designing the latest iPhone. It can be systems and processes and the way we work," she says.

"It doesn't always have to be science and technology to expand

upon, we're a very risk-averse nation ... we don't offer incentives for innovation or entrepreneurs." De Jong laments the nation's flagging OECD innovation table rankings.

While she says the venture capitalist system is growing and more companies are funding start-ups, there is still not enough support to allow business growth, and therefore employ more people. She wants companies to define their innovation strategies, including in professional services and companies dealing with technology. If they do not have a plan to move forward and improve their practices, she says they will be unlikely to survive long-term.

De Jong will discuss disruptive technologies, music, business and IT at the Creative Innovation Global conference in Melbourne from March 23. Speakers will include American Peter Diamandis, who has been named among the world's 50 greatest leaders by Fortune magazine.