

# Sparking Innovation Challenges That Can Impact Employee Morale and Your Bottom Line

CapTech Trends | Podcast | Episode 17



Vinnie

Hello and welcome to CapTech Trends, a place where we meet with thought leaders and subject matter experts to discuss emerging technology design and project methodology. I'm your host, Vinnie Schoenfelder, principal and CTO of CapTech Consulting. Today we're focusing on CapTech's approach to innovation, specifically our innovation challenges. I have with me, Jack Cox and Brian Bishoff. Jack is a fellow and Brian is a principal, who both partner with me on thought leadership and innovation. We also have Ryan Tarrant, a senior manager who has been very active on basically all the innovation challenges we've had. So he can give us more of an inside view of how those run. To get started, it's kind of a kind of interesting origin story. I'm going to first set to you, Brian, can kick us off with what I am talking about when I say innovation challenges? And where did it come from?

Brian

Thanks for having me today. It's funny, I was reflecting on this while preparing for this podcast. I do remember the meeting we were sitting in your office, Jack was there and there may have been a few other folks there. And we were talking about how do we get more information on natural language processing? Or natural language processing-related technologies? And the typical go-to answer was, well, let's call up person A, B, and C and see if they have some time and see if they want to dive in and learn on this. It's that the tiger team approach, Vinnie, that you refer to a lot. And one of the things we discussed, quite honestly was, we were worried about the fact we go into that same group of people over and over again, to try to come up with an idea or prove a solution or prove a technology. And so the risk was, we were gonna burn them out. And so what I remember, I don't remember who said it, but I do remember sitting in your office and somebody saying, "why don't we just ask the whole company? Let's throw a technology out to the entire company, and just see if they can come up with a solution, a business-related solution with that technology, and see what kind of ideas they come up with." And so that was kind of the genesis behind our innovation challenges.

Vinnie

Yeah, I remember that as well. It's funny, we don't always ask the same six people to do the tiger teams, but it is a subset of six people out of the same 15 people for sure. And typically, these are known high-performers. And they're usually on critical projects as well. And they typically don't say no, very well. So the tendency to burn them out is much, much higher. And I say known high-performers because I want to make it very clear that through this innovation challenge process, we've uncovered so much talent. We thought we knew who to go to for things, we knew the people who we were going to were certainly strong. But there were a lot of other strong people that weren't getting opportunities, just because we were growing so fast. So this opened up a lot of avenues for us to discover talent. internally.

Jack

Yeah, I recall a lot of discussions also during that meeting and a couple of meetings afterward about what should the guardrails be for these technology challenges. How prescriptive should we be with the solutions or the approaches, or team structure? And we decided to go with a very



broad, very loose guardrails, where we just let name a technology and the team self forms out of across offices across practice areas, and build their own teams and build their own relationships and cultures within those teams to build that the solution that they're aiming to build.

Vinnie

Yeah, I think that was one of the critical success factors: teams self-form. They define their own solution, for say natural language processing or artificial intelligence or augmented reality or accessible solutions, or whatever it may be for that time. And they run about two to three months. We do about three of them a year. But the teams formed naturally. And what's great is sometimes they're interoffice. Sometimes they're not. Sometimes it's a bunch of recent college hires. Sometimes it's a mix of people across practice areas and different skill sets. And it really allows people to explore and learn and scratch that intellectual curiosity edge. And it gives us a lot of value. You know, if we did the tiger team thing, Brian, you were talking about, we end up with one thing, one solution that we thought of that somebody else implemented. In this scenario, we get 8 to 10 different ideas that we didn't think of. And we're uncovering a lot of talent. So Ryan, to get you in this conversation, you've been involved in a lot of these early on. Can give us a little background on what excited you about it and how you were forming teams? Because you took a leadership position in that very early on.

Ryan

Yeah, I jumped in multiple of them (because I got tired of not winning) and learned something new every time. And I really wanted Philly to represent well. So we had a day where we decided to brainstorm on a whole bunch of ideas and there was one that I became super passionate about that hit a lot of technologies I've played around with in the past. You get that with the right group of people, you can just get completely engulfed in what you're trying to do and accomplish.

Vinnie

You said, "I got tired of not winning," and that's something that we've kind of changed along the way. Brian, why don't you talk about how we recognize and reward people who participated in this challenge?

Brian

Yeah, that was something we discussed early on, it felt weird picking a winner because, you know, people took time out of their day, typically, outside of their normal hours, we're creating a team as a solution that they were passionate about. And all the solutions were good on their own merits. So how do we pick a winner, the way we decided we were going to do it rather than, you know, blatantly picking a winner and giving them a prize or something like that. But the outcome was basically to give that team the opportunity to present their solution to the rest of the company. And tell the rest of the company really why they went down this path and how they solved the problem. Give them a chance to be in the spotlight and to demonstrate the way that they think and the way they approach solving problems. That was actually kind of a unique moment. We asked in a survey following that first innovation challenge, was recognition incentive



enough to get involved and participate. And it was overwhelmingly supportive of just getting that recognition, the opportunity to speak in front of the entire company, that people don't get very often or rarely, if ever. That was something that people were very passionate about. So we went from that. Originally, the teams all presented to leadership in our company. Kind of like a Shark Tank concept where they had about an hour to present their idea and we take notes, judged them, and provided feedback. Then we selected who we thought would present to the company. Now, what we've done is actually pivot so that the teams self-rate themselves and the other teams. So the teams actually pick what they think is the best solution and then follow that through to the company meeting presentation.

Vinnie

Yeah, one of the things that we didn't mention so far is that we give a limited definition of the problem, and let the team's self define what they want to solve. So anyway, we would go to every single office with a theme, and sometimes that's six to eight offices in the matter of like five days and have them present directly to so. Then of course go to dinner or go to happy hour or do whatever else. So there's an awful lot of relationship building in this as well. Jack, can you speak to how those meetings are run and what it's like during that week? Going to six to eight cities and taking all this in?

Jack

You'll wake up early in the morning, get on an airplane, fly to a city. You have lunch in the office, they do the presentations that afternoon, where we have a panel usually Brian, Vinnie, and myself. The teams in that office will present their product. We'll have discussions, freeform discussions, and then we'll have usually an office happy hour, then we'll crash. We'll get up the next day and do it all over again.

Vinnie

Sometimes just more than one city in a day. Yeah. I think it's really important to also note that when we come and into a city and have a team present to us, we're not there as the expert. We're not there evaluating and judging what they're learning, because this team just spent two to three months figuring some great stuff out. We may ask questions based on you know, our knowledge of architecture or technology, or approach. But we really are coming in with the mindset of wanting to learn about how things were done, as opposed to being judgmental and how an approach was taken. We

Jack

We do learn a ton from the team's questions like, "what surprised you about working with this technology," "what was particularly hard, what was particularly easy?" And we have a lot of times we'll see common patterns across the different teams working on the technology. Like with machine learning, they all said getting the data was extremely difficult and coming up with data they could actually train off of. A lot of the teams learned that you cannot produce synthetically fake data and train a machine off, that data just does not work.



Vinnie

So, Ryan, this is us talking about ourselves flying around. What's it like being on the receiving end of that? Did you feel that? Did your teams feel valued? Was it a positive experience as part of the process?

Ryan

Yeah. Well, I appreciate that you guys did all the offices in five days because that gave us the entire runway to get to the end there. Where we were panicking sometimes the day of or day before trying to get some things to work. You know, you want to be at the point where you're doing a recorded demo, and I think we had success, having recorded demos as backups. But in most cases, we're doing live demos, and live demos don't always go well.

Vinnie

I remember you fixing something minutes before the presentation. That kind of stands out?

Ryan

Yes, there were a couple. There was one, it was the IoT challenge. We were using a Raspberry Pi, and we just shorted the circuit. We were panicking while getting some of the extra pieces in place right before the live demo. Yeah, and sometimes they go well, and sometimes they don't. And having the recorded backup was definitely a lesson learned.

Vinnie

Let's switch to value. So what are we getting out of this? Brian? Obviously, we talked about getting people engaged and innovating and coming up with ideas, but what other value are we deriving from this program.

Brian

So there's definitely the people side of just a different outlet of putting their energy towards something that maybe they're not doing in their normal day jobs. But I'll always remember the very first presentation that was presented to us. It was in the hospitality space about how to best use Alexa or voice-related technologies. And in the room, within the first 15 minutes, one of our CEOs was on the panel listening in, and he kind of chimed in and said, Have you taken this to a client yet? Have you taken a solution to a client? And of course, the answer was not yet. But I remember him getting really excited about this. And within a month, we actually had that solution being presented to a client as a way to be more innovative about how they might be able to engage with their customers in their rooms. And it wasn't something they hadn't thought of. It allowed us to have a different perspective on the conversations with them than we normally would have. That's an example of something that our clients benefit from this. Our clients benefit from this by having different ideas, different ways of using technology, but different thoughts



about how to solve some of the problems that they're facing as well. There's a value to our people, but also to our clients and seeing some of the new different ways they can use the technologies available to them.

Vinnie

So Jack, what are other examples of where innovation challenge technology has led to innovative work for our clients?

Jack

We had a team at the Columbus office produce a response to our accessibility challenge. They produced a really interesting system that allows seniors to age in place using not extremely innovative technology, yet standard old, plain telephone system, but using the cloud services behind it. To drive phone calls to assess the mental state of the person answering the phone via answering a few questions. I thought it was amazing. And we were able to present it to a number of organizations that work with seniors trying to help them age in place. It has led to some very, very good conversations. We've also done a number of augmented reality applications where we've taken the product from both the winner of that challenge as well as other people from that challenge and presented it to a utility company. And also hospitals, on how to use augmented reality to improve the customer experience.

Vinnie

That was something that that stood out to me as well, the augmented reality one was combined with very, very fine grain, indoor location services. And there have been some internal and external location services needs we've had from our clients that need to be super accurate. And now I can speak intelligently on the topic because I was not aware of how sensitive those sensors in the phones can be and how predictable they can be. I think an important thing to point out, we've had projects like our Denver team, they were doing IoT and wanted to measure the flow of beer through a kegerator. So, they were using the challenge to expense a kegerator. And of course, we approved it, because it was a great idea. And by the way, it had facial recognition. So you knew what beers you preferred and how much you were drinking. But to measure flow, the flow sensor was not accurate enough. So they retrofitted a Wii balance board, which was not only very accurate but open so that they could communicate with it. You know, you could argue what's the value of measuring beer in a kegerator? Well, first of all, they populated all of our images in that facial recognition system from social media. And it worked the first time each of us walked up to it, that was a great finding. Second, understanding that liquid flow is more difficult to measure than liquid weight that's been applied in a lot of other pitches that we've made. So the point I'm trying to make is that by being open and allowing the teams to come with their own problems and their own solutions, we can generalize that and apply it to many, many other problem domains, which I think is key.

Brian

Speaking of openness, just to follow up on Jack's first example, that specific innovation challenge



was around accessibility. And when I was thinking about this I thought people would come up with solutions, like Ryan's team did around colorblindness or around things of making physical environments more available. What I hadn't thought of were a lot of the other different areas that people took their own spin on this. There were cognitive disabilities that I hadn't even thought of or I wasn't as aware of that people came up with solutions for. The aging in place example that Jack mentioned, are all different variants of making the environment around us more accessible. And when we when it goes back to the point you made very early on, Vinnie, about how we structure these challenges is to be very open-ended. We are very general on purpose because it allows people to use their own personal preferences about where they want to lean into the specific solution.

Vinnie

Yeah, and Ryan, I'm gonna direct this toward you. Because a lot of times when I speak on panels, or I'm doing public speaking, I don't mean this to be a negative comment to other large companies, but I'll ask them if they're innovative? And they'll say yes. And they'll say, well, how are you innovative? And they'll say, well, we have an innovation lab. I'm like, great, how many people are in there? And it's like 20. And they are a 60,000 person organization. Or they'll say, oh, well, we do a hackathon. And how often? Once a year. How long does it last? 24 hours. Great. And you may, in fact, be an innovative company. But you aren't really engaging a large part of your organization in that innovation. So by making this open-ended and providing very loose guidelines, we're getting a lot of participation for a 1,100 person company. We get over 100 people engaged in these challenges every time and it's not always the same people. We've had hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people participate in this and it lasts for two to three months. We get a lot of questions from other companies like, how? And why are people spending nights and weekends doing this above their expected workload? What is different about us in the way that we're structuring this? Where other companies aren't able to get that participation? And is it the structure of the program? Where what are some of the key factors that you think make it successful?

Ryan

You have a general topic, right? And you start there. We had a couple of different brainstorming sessions in Philly, where we had a lunch where we just got up and said, "all right, everybody, give us your ideas on what we could do with IoT." We had fun. Right after that, everybody started having side conversations. It piqued their interest, just enough to then start the gears turning in their minds. And then it's like, oh, okay, we can now do this. It's also making teams in a way where you don't have 50 people on a project, and you don't have two people on a project, so it seems accomplishable. Even if we have questions, we can come back to you guys and it doesn't feel like there's ever a failure that's happening. I think, Brian, we've had a couple of teams in the past that have reached out to you and said, "Listen, we have this great idea. We started doing it, we had some research, but we just ran out of bandwidth. And it's and what do we do?" We can either help find other people to join that team and help you out. Or you can present what you learned, right? There's still value in that. You guys bringing back that what we're already doing is valuable, makes us want to even go at it more. The feeling of contribution in itself was motivating.



Vinnie

Jack, I'll throw this toward you. What are some of the best lessons we've learned from this for keeping this successful? Keeping it fresh, making sure that that we don't lose the momentum that we have?

Jack

I think one is to stay true to the intent of the innovation challenge. And that intent is to spur intellectual curiosity within an organization. We're not doing it to directly generate business leads or improve our account manager's status with our clients. It stood to spur intellectual curiosity. And we have had some pressure to do projects or technology focused on a specific client or market segment, but we've resisted that because it gets us away from us. Let's just be curious and chase that curiosity and see where it takes us. And I think that really points the value to the employee. To the consultant that's actually on the team. It's not like we're getting business development hours. It's, let's create this cool thing and where it goes.

Vinnie

Yeah, I was speaking in Atlanta and I was going through these key topics of why it's successful. And afterward, when a prospect of ours came up and said, "Hey, I want to implement this at our organization. But I want to focus it on this one problem that we've been struggling with, with this one data set." My response was no, you're basically just asking people to work nights and weekends for you. That doesn't scratch that intellectual curiosity itch at all. If you're just asking for more work from the same people. So I think that's a key point. Brian, any other thoughts on how we keep this successful and keep the momentum going?

Brian

I think encouraging people to present even if they feel like they just don't have an outlet to finish the idea. I think that's always important to do. You know, it is an interesting challenge, because when we first put this out there, we were worried that we weren't going to have anybody participate. Right? When you have such a broad topic sometimes, and I've talked to Ryan with you about this, when the idea is so broad that you don't have something specific you're asking people to do. Sometimes people don't know where to go. We were always worried about, we're throwing a party and not having anybody show up. That was the risk that we were taking for some of these decisions. But I think it has been important to remain broad with our opportunities and see what our teams can come up with.

Jack

There's I think there's also an interesting balance between coming as a peer and learning from the teams but also recognizing that the teams are wanting to get recognition for what they're building and for what they're doing. So having that recognition there and continually providing the recognition to the teams, even the teams that don't necessarily finish the challenge. I think that's an important aspect. I think it would not be successful if the teams were filtered first before they get to the more senior level judging. I think it's important that the senior-level judges do see



every team that participates.

Ryan

A side benefit that you can have too, is you learn, especially from the more junior side, you learn how to make things MVP. You learn how to get it to a solution in a minimal amount of time. I mean, two months seems like a lot of time compared to one day but compared to a project that would be running maybe a year.

Vinnie

Ryan just mentioned MVP, I would actually challenge that and say most of these aren't quite MVP. But they're certainly not POC (proof of concept). So what are some of the recommendations you give to those teams, from a design perspective?

Jack

Don't solve problems that have already been solved. We've seen teams that spend a lot of time developing an API, and building an API is something we do every day, it's not innovative, they got distracted from the true innovation of what they're trying to build. So focus on the innovation aspect, and fake everything else. Remember, this is a proof of concept. It doesn't need to be deployable. It's something that we would take input into a pitch. And present the clients as this is a very interesting idea that we've proven out. Focus on what that hard innovation problem is, not on the stuff we do day to day.

Vinnie

You would have to worry about authentication and password resets and stuff like that, right?

Jack

No security whatsoever.

Vinnie

Right. Architected in such a way that those things are pluggable, I would say you so want to be responsible in your approach. I challenged Ryan a bit on the MVP word. Now, I'm gonna challenge you a bit Jack on PSA. I think it's more than that. I think it's in the middle. Because from a POC perspective, we can demonstrate if the technology works, but our best submissions in these challenges are ones that have an eye toward design. They know how to capture the imagination of the audience. So Brian, why don't you talk a little bit about the role of CX and design in these challenges?

Brian



Yeah, I think that's something we've learned as we've gone through this. There's certainly a balance here. But we've learned that it's not about the technology per se, right? It's about how the technology can be used to solve a business problem. And then how customers or end-users or whoever your audience is, actually engages with it. There have been teams that have come through and actually done external research. One team went through and tried to figure out how to do make, I think, virtual meetings more accessible for people with different varying degrees of disability. And they took the opportunity to go to a local meetup for people with hearing disabilities. They learned how to do sign language, and learned different aspects of how to communicate in different ways just to get a part of an understanding of those end-users in various situations so that they could then apply that to that problem at hand. Understanding users intent and behaviors and how it applies to some of these technologies is a big part of actually making sure that technology solution applicable. And then when it comes to the presentations that the teams deliver to the leadership teams, having that kind of engagement, it's more like a pitch process. You've talked about MVP, we talked about PLCs. But that's like a pitch scenario, it allows our people to think differently about being engaging, and how to state the business problem they're trying to solve for and state their solution. Then what this could possibly turn into if we were to invest in this further.

Vinnie

I'm glad you brought that up. Because that's hugely valuable to Ryan's point before of sometimes people don't finish. And we encourage them to still present what they've learned and what they found. A lot of times, there are parts of the implementation process that are still valuable. But to your point, Brian, just getting this experience in pitching to senior leadership to many people across the organization increases confidence. I've said it 100 times, getting better at presenting in front of a group of people comes down to the reps. Reps, feedback, and reflection. Ask people how you did be honest about it, and do it again. Having a safe place to do that multiple times a year, I think really helps develop that that next level of leadership talent and organization. I think, you know, I look at you specifically for that. I mean, we all knew who you were prior to this when we visited the Philly office, but seeing how you stepped into this. We didn't ask you to do that. We put this out there, and you took it upon yourself to help organize and promote that within your office. And that definitely increased the visibility to senior leadership for yourself. Talk to us a bit about what you saw in that opportunity and how others can move into this space and do what we've done? I think a lot of that comes down to people like yourself, within the organization who are willing to grab a hold of it and make the most of it.

Ryan

Yeah, I mean, I think a lot of it comes down to it's a safe place, right? Everything that we're presenting here, is not going to make or break my career necessarily. Like if I misspeak in my presentation to you guys, or I'm not always on fire, I didn't lose a billion-dollar contract on something. It's just a place to express your ideas. And into your point, the very first time through, I was nervous as a wreck talking to you guys. But when you guys come and visit, you bring it down to earth for us. Where it doesn't feel like we have such a big gap. It helps us get into that comfort zone to be able to continue making those pitches, even internally in those safe places to present. It's also encouraging to have other people say, listen, you can take charge of what you want. If you want to accomplish something, or if you want to do something, just take charge and allow



people to take those opportunities. Don't pigeonhole people and say, "no, no, this isn't far enough along for you to present."

Vinnie

Yeah, it's a good point. Because a lot of times people wait for others to give them opportunities. And I don't think that's the right way to do it. I think you make things available, and let the people who are interested and hungry, go grab those opportunities. And reach out to a lot of other people and pull them in as well.

Ryan

You actually see a lot of that out of our Philly office. You see a rotation of people that are like, "oh, you know, I have some bandwidth, I want to give this a shot. I want to practice or I'll learn something new." And then they take a couple of off a couple of innovation challenges off and then other people come in. So it's a nice little rotation. And, and everybody feels welcome.

Vinnie

Jack, Brian, thoughts on how someone listening to this podcast, how they can get more innovation in their organization and engage their employees? What are some first steps? How do you how do we launch a program like this in a larger organization?

Brian

Take the risk, take the leap. That's what we did. It was an opportunity to test and see really how innovative our company could be. And we put a question out there and people responded. I think that was the thing just to get over. The fear that a lot of people have in general conversation about these challenges, is that they aren't a CapTech. They're like "well, our people aren't innovative, our people wouldn't come up with the same solution you guys have come up with. And I challenge that and say, well, you just haven't given them the opportunity. So it's not that our company is any smarter than a lot of the companies out there, right? We just encourage and provide the atmosphere and the environment for people to test and learn. It's an opportunity for them to really step out of their normal boundaries and try something new. So just getting over that hump, and that willingness to say, let's just put an opportunity out there, doesn't have to be the entire company, you know for a 10,000 person company that maybe it doesn't make sense to do that. But maybe it's within your organization, maybe it's within your team, to say let's just put a small challenge out there and see what ideas people come up with. I think that start there and see where it goes.

Vinnie

Yeah, and that goes to Jack's point too, which is value innovation for innovation's sake. Right? We're not doing this to solve a particular business problem or functional problem. This is really innovation for innovation's sake. There's room for the other stuff, there's still room for Tiger teams, there's still room for focusing on specific problems, this is just a different thing.



Jack

This is not a solution where if you want to have an answer in a week. This is not that type of solution. I want to build intellectual curiosity. I want to build this culture. And it's going to take six months to a year and several cycles of going through this and people building this the muscle memory to do these innovation challenges. I would also say, within an organization, don't skimp on the recognition for the people that take part in this. Make sure they're getting recognized as high up the company as you can get them recognized.

Vinnie

Yeah, you know, people talk about culture all the time. But this is how you build it. These are the things you have to do. I want to wrap this up. Before I do, though, I'm going to ask each one of you to reflect on your best or favorite moment, something that really sticks in your mind.

Ryan

So my high-value moment is around an IoT challenge. It's the one where we did density tracking, using security cameras, in 2018. We presented it to a client that it would make it made sense for, but it didn't make sense for them in 2018. Fast forward to 2020. Density tracking is all the rage when COVID hit. How many people are in a room or on a train or a bus? And that was a, you never know what you're actually innovating for until it really matters, moment.

Vinnie

Yeah, we were just reacting to it, we would have been very, very late, right? But we had already uncovered that way ahead of time. Jack, thoughts on a high-value moment for yourself?

Jack

I come back to that first innovation challenge where I was like, wow, these people really put in a lot of hours, these people are really smart. And they came up with some really cool ideas. And these people are six months out of college. They built a really compelling pitch, a compelling idea that led to client conversations. That has actually continued through all the challenges. We sit down with teams and are continually being blown away by the energy and the fresh ideas that the teams are bringing to the table.

Brian

In a similar vein, I remember standing in front at one of these company meetings, Vinnie, you, and I. And typically what we do is we go through and summarize each of the solutions before we announce who the quote-unquote winner is going to be, the one that's going to present their solution. They present their solutions, we went off stage, and the meeting ended. Afterward, we were just socializing with a few folks and I met some new college hires that started that week. They came up to me and they're like, wow, that presentation was incredible. There are so many



smart people at CapTech, I'd never be able to do that. And I said nothing is stopping you from coming up with an idea and pursuing it. At the next challenge, guess who some of the folks were that presented? In these challenges, people who are literally just out of college, realize that they have an opportunity to do something like that. The moral that story is in all different aspects of your company, you'd be surprised at where you'll get participation or new ideas to come from.

Vinnie

Mine is similar. There was a presentation in Charlotte around machine learning and someone was going into a deep discussion on neural networks. How that methodology is borrowed from pharmaceuticals and how drug therapy uses the same things and provided a lot of background and detail and math. I was blown away. I had no idea that this person had this background. So I said, Gosh, that's amazing. How long have you been working in pharmaceuticals and, and neural networks? And he was like, well, I haven't, I just started at the beginning of the project. He had invested so much time and effort and pride in the solution, that he was able to go that deep that quickly. I was just blown away. The people that you uncover to me is hugely valuable. That's really going out and creating genuine relationships with people. So great. So I'm going to wrap it up here, guys, I want to be sensitive on time. Thanks for your time. And for those listening. If you're enjoying these podcasts, please subscribe to them, and share links on social media to help us out. Thanks, guys.

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