

AT THE EDGE PODCAST



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BOB PULVER – Hybrid Work Is Not Going Away

Interviewed by Michael Lee

Bob Pulver is Global Head of Business Development at Innovation Minds. Previous to this, he was the Director of IT Strategy and Innovation at NBCUniversal Media. And before that he spent nearly fifteen years at IBM in a wide variety of capacities spanning topics from global collaboration and intrapreneurship to social analytics and market intelligence, most recently as the Global Program Leader of Cognitive Innovation. Bob has become a veteran workplace strategist highly versed in helping organizations understand and plan for how emerging technologies will impact their organizations and their people.

In this bonus episode, Bob talks about what his storied career has taught him about how people and culture, not technology or strategy, that power organizations, and provides insight into how organizational change and flexibility is at the core of delivering on the future of work.

Michael Lee

Bob, welcome to At the Edge. And thank you very much for being here.

Bob Pulver

Great to be here, Michael.

Michael Lee

Tell us a bit about your history of employee engagement, innovation, the workplace.

Bob Pulver

I spent most of my career at IBM in a variety of roles doing supply chain transformation process, what we used to call process reengineering, or process transformation. I quickly moved into doing some work around requirements management, or what today you would call product management, building internal products. And then quickly got involved in innovation management or enterprise innovation programs that IBM was establishing.

They had built their own proprietary idea management platform. I was a volunteer to help not only submit ideas, but help ideas find homes, find sponsors, it was just fascinating to me to see how much people wanted to contribute, that they were going beyond their day jobs to share their wisdom and their insight from the front lines. It just sparked this curiosity in me that led me to diverging from just climbing the corporate ladder, so to speak, and doing what I thought was meaningful to me. Things that would keep me engaged in my work, and make me glad to be doing what I was doing in the heart of emerging technology.

I stayed there throughout my career focusing on areas like what we call social business. We might call it digital transformation today. But really, how do you rally people around common causes and finding solutions collectively to some of the challenges that were happening either at the company or across industries. Really getting into these concepts of collective intelligence and crowdsourcing really before there was such a thing.

The gig marketplace and the gig economy and all those things were still sort of nascent, but I constantly carved my own path, looking at things that would help companies get the full benefit of everything that people had to offer. And then marrying that with emerging technology, so a lot of the work at IBM around what they called augmented intelligence, not just artificial intelligence, with the birth of, of IBM Watson. I was at the heart of that, and that continued to fascinate me and want to keep me sort of as an early adopter and an evangelist of technology.

Michael Lee

You guys at IBM were ahead of your time, as of the time you've left there, things have changed a lot.

Bob Pulver

After weaving around IBM for over two decades, I left there and went to NBC Universal, where I had an opportunity to be on the executive team in the CEO's office and work on both strategy and innovation. So I really got to see how I could put some of those capabilities into practice and start to really wake people up to the art of the possible as he used to say. And so I did that for a number of years.

More recently, I joined the Innovation Minds team to help grow that business, to help drive product strategy. Obviously, wearing a bunch of hats, as a start-up always entails. There's incredible opportunity now, and people have woken up to allowing employees or whatever your relationship is with a company, to bring your whole self to that hybrid work environment. So whether you're at home or you're getting back to the office, or some mix of the two, it's great to be at the forefront and in the epicenter of all these dramatic changes.

Michael Lee

Tell us about some of the changes. We all know about the great resignation and we know about the situation with hybrid work. What do you see as the opportunities that are ahead of us?

Bob Pulver

When I reflect back on my career, I start to see the patterns that I didn't necessarily see at the time. All of these areas that I've been focused on really come back to this concept of human potential. Some of that is bringing your whole self to work, making sure that you have the right people in the right roles. I think technology only recently has really enabled that.

We certainly dabbled with it back when I was at IBM, especially in my years working with IBM Research in the mid 2000s. There were all kinds of programs and capabilities around social analytics and understanding what makes people tick and how they're engaged and doing sentiment analysis on how they're contributing. Thinking about the ways that they contribute, I think there's been an enormous resurgence of that of late because people have woken up to say, Wow, this isn't just a nice-to-have, interesting little toy with cool visualizations about your social network. This is fundamental to how work is getting done, how people stay engaged.

And the insight that can be derived from some of those capabilities is critical. You can see the investments being made in this overarching HR technology space, and it's not about HR legacy environments. It's not about back end stuff. It's about the systems of engagement and the systems of insight that you now have at your disposal to really understand how can I be more effective. And part of that is making sure you've got the right people in the right roles.

There's a huge category within HR Tech around people analytics. For those of us who were living this, even ten or fifteen years ago, it's incredibly rewarding to see that globally, people are recognizing the power of some of these capabilities. We see in the market, there's unicorns all over the place. To the point where we have to now redefine what it means to be a unicorn.

We see it in large enterprises as they are having to basically redefine the mission of HR. They're no longer being protective of the organization and some of the more traditional functions of HR. Now they're much more around how do we do what's best for our people. They've even changed the names of some of these roles. Chief People Officer. Chief Talent Officer. So they've really started to think how is HR going to work more closely with the business to be a strategic advisor, and enable things around people and culture and wellness, diversity, equity, inclusion. These are all really critical elements that companies have had to really rethink.

It's technology that has brought some of these things to light. It's technology that will augment human capability and human potential. You can take certain things off of people's plates and let them move on to higher value activities where they'll find more meaning. It'll be more rewarding, they'll have more autonomy, and they'll just be happier and more engaged employees.

Michael Lee

So what do you think is the secret to making employees satisfied in the future?

Bob Pulver

You can always ask them, of course, where do they find meaning? What are they looking to do with their careers? Where do they want to work? Who do they want to work with? What kinds of problems do they want to solve? Some of it is explicitly provided by employees just by engaging them. They want to be heard. They want to be listened to.

If you want to lower your attrition rates and increase your engagement rates, you really got to get pretty deep with the data points to understand how these people think. How they work. How do you really listen to them? How do you really understand how things are going on an ongoing basis? Because then you can start to align people to opportunities a little bit better. As much as that might sound like a significant effort, think about the payoff. But I think that's one of the critical elements that we need to do and do it at scale.

Michael Lee

Why did you join Innovation Minds?

Bob Pulver

One of my last projects at IBM was leading this entrepreneurial community where they had developed a lot of Watson-powered solutions. There was a huge crowdsourcing exercise across the entire company to get everyone to understand the strategic direction of IBM at the time. We've seen them divest from the PC business, and then some of the infrastructure business, to really double down on what they now call hybrid cloud and AI. So everyone upskilled and they formed teams, and they built, in many cases, working prototypes of these AI-based solutions. So I led a team through that. And then I led this community.

So I saw the Innovation Minds website, and some of what they were doing, they basically commercialized the idea that I personally submitted in this IBM contest. How do you make sure that you don't let ideas fall through the cracks? How do you build strong teams? How do you pull in, you know, internal and external insights to make sure you're building a strong business case and ensure that there's product-market fit and all the things you need to do as you're scaling a start-up.

And I couldn't believe what I was seeing, like he had basically done all the things that I had hoped to do. And so my passion for innovation, the fact that there was this direct correlation between what I was passionate about at the end of my IBM career and what Bala had built. With Innovation Minds, it just seemed like such a natural fit, and I wanted to come in and see what I could do to help.

Michael Lee

What do you think is the secret sauce for the future of hybrid work? What is the way that hybrid work can be made as effective as possible?

Bob Pulver

One of the things that everyone keeps debating is, are we more productive at home or are we more productive in the office? Hybrid is not going away, and you have to expect that every activity you need to get done, every meeting you need to hold, there's going to be some combination of people who are in the office and people who are work-from-anywhere. You need people who are going to think through not just individual technology trends, but the intersection of trends. And I think that's just the nature of foresight and future thinking.

You've got to understand that we're in this VUCA world. There's a lot of uncertainty and there's a lot of variability. And you've got to be able to have that flexibility. And the only way to do that without losing a tremendous amount of productivity is to have technology, be able to sense and suggest those kinds of things. That sort of thought process is needed as you design some of the things that people are going to need, regardless of where they happen to be working from.

Michael Lee

So let's talk about AI a bit. You worked on Watson. What are the benefits of AI? And how can it be most taken advantage of?

Bob Pulver

I think you've got to clearly define AI and what problems it's solving, how it's helping humans. Not taking work or decisions away from human beings necessarily. The concept of augmented intelligence I did buy into because there are still humans programming in the first place. In the healthcare space, there's still a doctor ultimately responsible for that decision, right? It's just how can they possibly be expected to read every medical journal and know every possible condition, when a patient walks into their office. So you really need that technology to support human decision making.

Michael Lee

What's the way that the average company can incorporate Artificial Intelligence into their processes?

Bob Pulver

There's a couple of different ways. First of all, there are capabilities that AI providers may have, like a marketplace where you can tap into specific APIs and capabilities. You can embed those into your own solution just like you would any other API to do integration. The big cloud vendors have provided all kinds of toolkits that allow you to build much more easily than you could a decade ago, but allow you to build some of your own capabilities and build your own models.

A lot of start-ups have had to customize and build their own AI models because there's a specific data set that they needed to be trained on. Or it's just something so niche that the big providers never invested in that level of detail. Some of the conversational AI bots, a lot

of those were sort of generic, you could plug them in but then you had to train them significantly on your own corpus of data and use cases.

There was a start-up that I was talking to who are doing conversational AI that supports restaurants. Anyone who's been through a drive-thru restaurant has experienced the horrible quality of the speakers at some of those restaurant drive-thrus. If they can't hear you, or you can't hear them, you really are just rolling the dice of whether they got your order right. The founder gave me a demo of this solution. It was amazing how accurate it was. This person kept changing their orders: Oh, can you add this? Can you add that? Oh, no, don't put ketchup on that. And it could support multiple languages. That's the kind of accuracy that people expect.

So if you can exceed their expectations it becomes a memorable experience instead of just a routine Friday night visit to Arby's or whatever.

Michael Lee

Is this the future we're facing now that everybody's worried about? "The Robot Apocalypse!" Everybody's going to lose their jobs unless they're highly educated or incredibly creative. How is this going to work for people?

Bob Pulver

I've been following the automation space for quite a while. This was a big focus area for me when I was at NBC Universal, trying to find different ways to automate things. There's always been a lot of work that is left undone because people are spending too much time doing some of the more mundane tasks on their plate.

I've always looked at it as, I'm not trying to automate jobs and remove people from the equation. That's the last thing I want to do. I've been unemployed. It's not fun and I don't wish it on anybody. Because it's not spending the twenty to forty percent of your time doing things that a machine or some robotic process automation tool or even some more advanced automation tool could do on your behalf to free you up to do all these other things, right?

So every time I've asked anyone, it could be an individual contributor, it could be a manager, or it could be an executive, how much of your day do you think is wasted? What else would you be doing if you weren't doing this task or that task? There's always an answer. It's not like they would be sitting around twiddling their thumbs or their work week would be twenty or twenty-five hours instead of forty or fifty or sixty. There's always other things that are not getting done. What's the opportunity cost? Why not just free people up to move on to those higher value tasks? The goal is to identify, What are those tasks that don't really give anyone any particular meaning or satisfaction to do, that a machine could do? How could you write a script to program it to do certain things?

Anyone who has a smart home knows that there are scripts behind the scenes that say, if this happens, then do this. As you get deeper and move up the automation maturity curve, you move past these basic scripts of robotic process automation, to more intelligent or even

cognitive automation. There is an intersection of AI and automation, where it can look at all kinds of conditions and understand the context. That could be investment decisions. It could be medical decisions. It could be supply chain decisions or supply chain itself. Logistics is an enormously complex challenge that research teams have been working on for decades.

I think the key is to get people to recognize that technology has always advanced. There's always been technology that comes along and displaces certain tasks that people do. The goal is not to have everybody sit on the couch and let robots do everything. The goal is to let people reach their potential and find meaning in their work. All these automation efforts, what's it going to mean to us? And how do we get people who are not unemployed, but underemployed - there's so many people that are capable of so much more. And they might not even be aware of what they're capable of.

So that goes back to some of the assessments that I talked about earlier. What do people really want to do? Where do they find meaning? What are they good at? You may think people are asking too many questions or they're trying to take my job away, but ultimately, the goal should be for the company to be successful and the employee to be successful. This is not a zero sum game, right? This can be a win-win situation.

By moving people to more meaningful work, you've got a lifelong relationship. I haven't worked at IBM since 2017. Four and a half years ago. But I'm still a big IBM advocate. I still am proud of what they do. And they should appreciate that. It doesn't have to be hire to retire. The whole employee experience extends into the post-employment period, alumni. Because I can always refer people to IBM. I can always advocate for them. Relationships don't end just because I'm no longer a W2 IBM employee.

Michael Lee

If you have to give people a message, what's Bob Pulver's message?

Bob Pulver

As I reflect back on all the things that I've done and I try to weave a story through that lattice of my career, those themes around human potential keeps sticking in my mind. And so I guess I would want people to really think about, take a really deep look at what you find meaningful in life and work at what do you really want to work on? And don't hold yourself back. And don't take a victim mentality and think "Automation is coming, what am I going to do?" and fall on your heels. You can take an active role in shaping your career wherever you are in your career trajectory.

And so I would encourage everyone to think about what brings you meaning? How can you think about technology not as something coming to take your job but something to help you do whatever job you choose to do. Don't underestimate yourself. Always be learning and thinking about how you solve problems. Don't be a different person at work than you are at home. Don't sacrifice your values for a pay check. When you're at the end of your career and you're reflecting back, you will at least know that you did things that you found meaning in

and you found success and were more engaged in as a better teammate, a better leader, a better mentor. If you know that you've brought your whole self to work.

Being sort of mid-career and reflecting back on all the things that I've done, I don't regret any of the experiences. I don't regret jumping off that corporate ladder and taking a more latticed approach. Of late I've seen a lot of advice that talks about that. And it's nice to hear that. Because I've been living that for most of my career. If I see something else I want to do, I make a pivot, and I go do it. And I don't care what people think like, he was a director, why didn't he become a VP? I didn't want to be a VP. I wanted to go and work and solve interesting problems. I had enough large enterprise experience. I decided to go off on my own, which I always thought about doing and now I did it. And now I'm working on really interesting problems helping young companies grow, helping them understand what those large enterprises are all about, how to navigate them as potential clients, things like that.

And so sometimes you just have to take some risks, especially if the upside is deeper satisfaction, better work-life balance. It's important that you really think deeply about what's important to you.

Michael Lee

Well, thanks Bob Pulver. We really appreciate the time you've given us, Thanks for sharing all of that information from IBM to Innovation Minds.

Bob Pulver

Thanks very much, Michael. This was great.