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Innovation, entrepreneurial thinking vital for IT leaders

Computerworld Honors Program laureates, recognized today, share vision

By Jaikumar Vijayan

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WASHINGTON D.C. -- Jason Palmer has some pretty straightforward advice for executives looking to derive more value from technology: be a contrarian.

"Always challenge what you think will work, always challenge what you have done," says Palmer, president of SmartDrive Systems, which offers businesses a service for improving fleet safety and fuel consumption.

"This allows you to think outside the box and identify opportunities that you wouldn't have expected," says Palmer, whose company was one of dozens recognized at the [Computerworld Honors Program](#) held here Monday at the historic Andrew W. Mellon auditorium.

The Honors Program has been held for the last 24 years and recognizes organizations that use information technologies in innovative ways to promote public welfare.

Several organizations received [Achievement Awards](#) at the event including DataDyne for developing a free data collection tool for nonprofits and humanitarian organizations; Curriki for creating an online community that makes educational materials available for free to students and educators around the world; OhioHealth for a mobile application that delivers real-time healthcare information to patients via their smartphones; and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for developing an innovative facial recognition tool for fighting crime.

LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman, who received the Morgan Stanley Leadership Award for Global Commerce at the event, stressed the importance of entrepreneurial thinking in a fast changing world. Companies that want to create jobs and make a difference to society will increasingly need to think, behave and take risks like entrepreneurs do, he said.

It's advice that resonated with Palmer and several others at the event.

"Over 20 years and six separate startups I have found that it is critical in order to advance that you have to look at the changing market dynamics and look at how current processes can be improved with technology," Palmer said.

As an example, he pointed to SmartDrive's research around fleet safety. "Traditionally in commercial safety, much of the data regarding the cause of collisions was done through accident reconstruction. This provided limited insight into the real behaviors that lead to collisions," he said.

So instead, the company offers customers an event recording system that combines video, audio and vehicle data. The system is designed to give fleet managers a much more detailed view than previously available, of everything that happened inside and in front of a vehicle, before during and after a collision, or other safety event.

"From this process we have been able to identify that distracted driving behavior is actually the leading cause of fundamental driving errors like unsafe lane changes, running stop signs, and speeding," Palmer said.

SmartDrive has also done several studies on fuel consumption and discovered that contrary to common perception, its not vehicle idling that wastes the most fuel but hard accelerations, hard braking and hard turns. "Through continuous testing and optimization the last two years we have found that [companies] can save as much as 29% of fuel by focusing on [these] specific driving skills," he said.

Innovative and entrepreneurial approaches are critical during challenging economic times said Shyam Desigan, the chief financial officer at Volunteers of America Chesapeake. The non-profit organization was recognized at the event for its work on building a predictive analytics capability for identifying new service opportunities.

"With compressing margins and changing customer landscape the only way for organizations to survive and thrive is be innovative and entrepreneurial," Desigan said. "When people say 'no' or 'can't be done on this budget' I have looked at creative ways which includes leveraging cloud computing and open source to drive incremental change."

Until recently, few CIOs would be fired for selecting companies such as an IBM or a Cisco as their technology partners, he said. "With the changing times there has been a paradigm shift in this thinking. CFOs like myself are increasingly looking for value," Designan said.

Lou August, a global co-leader of technology development at World Vision International, a faith-based relief, development, and advocacy organization based in Canada that was recognized at the event for a developing an innovative mobile technology for tracking aid distribution.

August describes a lot of the work that he and his teammates do as entrepreneurial in nature, whether it is creating technology-enabled programs that have never been done before, or building technology-enabled social ventures.

"As the founder and owner of a technology company for 20 years, I believe entrepreneurial skills are essential for an IT leader," August said. But equally vital is a passion for the job and

a willingness to work extremely hard towards a specific goal, he said. "This is a big reason why training people in entrepreneurship or guiding entrepreneurs to innovate in areas they are not passionate about often rarely works."

Another litmus test for IT leaders is their willingness to take risks, and their willingness to put their careers on the line for taking such risks. "This willingness is also tied to one's passion. Achieving a vision one is passionate about is always more valuable than one's career itself," August said.

Jaikumar Vijayan covers data security and privacy issues, financial services security and e-voting for Computerworld. Follow Jaikumar on Twitter at [@jaivijayan](#) or subscribe to [Jaikumar's RSS feed](#). His e-mail address is jvijayan@computerworld.com.

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