

Life at Nuance, Professional development

Q&A: How our latest internal hackathon brought innovation to non-profits

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We rise by lifting others. That's one of the reasons why our latest internal hackathon Innovation Challenge took on a different mold – one geared towards leveraging employee's innovative drive and creativity for social good.

We rise by lifting others. Robert Ingersoll said this a long time ago and it still rings true. And it's one of the reasons why we ran a different kind of internal hackathon from our usual product-focused event. The SS11 Innovation Challenge for Social Good leveraged Nuance employee's creativity for social good while empowering them to create relevant solutions. It allowed them to target real needs and problems from non-profit organizations that could be solved with Nuance's technology. Girl Scouts, a Performing Arts Ticketing Service, an organization for at-risk high-potential students and a political campaign are just a few of the nonprofits for which our teams designed. And, it was fun! Eduardo Olvera, Senior Manager, User Interface Design of the Cognitive Innovation Group led the event with leader Guy Hoovler, Senior Director Professional Services of the Enterprise Division. Here's what they had to say:

Why hold an Innovation Challenge for social good?

Guy Hoovler: Innovation challenge events demonstrate our division's support for innovative ideas, committing significant time and resources to support our employees' innovative and competitive initiatives. Incorporating the "social good" element this time sparked creativity in a number of the teams who were motivated by the challenge to solve real world problems, using our tech in a way that did something more than provide a bank balance.

“ More than half of my team – UI Designers, Developers, Speech Scientists and an Audio Engineer – volunteered for the SS11 Innovation Challenge. It really was a team effort and a dream come true to have a side project to try out all the newest technologies, including recognition for multiple intents in one sentence. We will never look at a girl scout cookie box the same way we did before the project.”

Jessie Wang
Principal Project Manager, Nuance



What is the impact of the event and the ideas? How will this help non-profits?

Eduardo Olvera: To facilitate team-building and cross-training within the Enterprise division while making the team's ideas and solution relevant by tying them to real world problems. Non-profits benefit because the nature of their problems makes them suitable to be solved with technology.



What was the most exciting part of the event?

Guy: Seeing the excitement and energy the teams brought to their presentations, especially while watching some of the teams execute live tech demos that actually worked!

Eduardo: For me, it was the response we received from participants, supporters and organizers. We had a very successful event, with 9 total teams with over 40 participants, all of which made it to the final line. We received support from upper management, directors and managers, local liaisons, subject matter experts, IT specialist, facilities administrators, human resources and legal staff. This event also marked many 'firsts' in the history of Innovation Challenges: the first Enterprise challenge that combined teams (CIG + PS),

multiple locations, a curated list of projects teams chose from, an emphasis on social good, a platform used for team's development, flexibility across a larger development period, idea checkpoints and SME office hours.

“ I loved collaborating with colleagues who I've never had the chance to work with before, including an awesome 7-year-old Girl Scout/budding voice talent and a developer who was willing to wear a green wig for the sake of our project 😊 It was interesting to see how each team focused on different features and possibilities of SS11 and succeeded in making the leap from theory to reality. I was very, very impressed with all the energy and effort that every team invested in this challenge.”

Marlene Weinstein
Senior Principal User Interface Designer, Nuance



What does innovation mean to you?

Eduardo: Innovation is the application of creative processes and ideas in novel and useful ways that add value and solve real world problems. The biggest mistake I see is people not realizing innovation is bigger than a product or technology platform, which means companies tend to not put the required level of support required to make it happen and then grow.

Guy: Innovation involves rethinking both the problem and the solution and implementing what is needed to fill in the gaps. I find things to be most innovative when they illustrate how we've been focused on the wrong questions.

Why is innovation important for not only Nuance, but for the greater community?

Eduardo: Because those companies, organization and communities that truly understand innovation, install strategies around it and execute it well, are the ones that achieve and sustain long-term success while at the same time keeping their employees, members and volunteers feeling satisfied, fulfilled, productive and excited about their personal and professional future.

Guy: Innovation keeps our minds agile – whether we do it ourselves or appreciate it when done by others. Seeing and doing innovation both serve to break us out of today's complacency and get us thinking in a constructive context about what happens next.



Being a new UI Designer, the Innovation Challenge allowed me to explore some of Nuance's newest technologies and also get to contribute to a project that had a large social impact. It's an experience I will truly never forget!"

Briana Li
UI Design Intern, Nuance



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a. We were honored to donate \$1,000 to help them further their mission and our teams are looking forward to the next Challenge.

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