Simon Mainwaring:

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Simon Mainwaring:

Hi everyone. It's Simon Mainwaring here, your host of Lead With We, a podcast that really looks at what drives business success in the reality of today's marketplace, the reality that's defined by crisis, defined by change and really a new normal that's reshaping business as we know it. And I'm really excited today, I've got a friend and colleague as a guest, Bob Lord. Bob has had an incredibly successful career, has been the global CEO of Razorfish. He headed up AOL as President, and now he's the Senior Vice President of Cognitive Applications and Developer Ecosystems at IBM. So firstly, Bob, really a pleasure to chat to you. And secondly, I think all of us kind of emotionally wrestling with what we've just been through, but also what the future looks like. What gives you cause for optimism?

Bob Lord:

Hey Simon, thank you very much for having me on. I have the privilege now of working at IBM, which is a global organization. The platform I have is incredibly inspiring. When you have a call to action or you want to do something that impacts the world, I've never had this platform before. You can impact the world by putting in a comprehensive program, and you can scale that program. When you have an idea, that global network that IBM has and the relationships they have institutionally with governments and with very large businesses throughout the world, allow you to activate at scale like I've never seen any other company do before, and it's inspiring.

Bob Lord:

So what I see, I see hope in China. I see hope in Europe now. I see the world coming together from a virtual standpoint like we've never done before. If you think about all these digital tools that we all have played with in the last four years, or maybe even five, 10 years, it seems like it's all in the last eight weeks, all come together to enable us to collaborate and work together. And I see people being more creative and innovative than ever before.

Simon Mainwaring:

I couldn't agree more. And taking a leaf out of your experience, what would you say to those smaller businesses out there, those people with an idea, to kind of keep them feeling positive?

Bob Lord:

I think it's an opportunity to reinvent yourself. I think the ways that we actually worked before are old ways. And you see it in the local restaurants here in Connecticut. I mean, some are being really innovative about how they're getting pickup and deliveries, and they're changing their business models up. I mean, there's a way of innovating

even under these dire circumstances that we're in right now, which I think shines light. You see lots of people reaching out and trying to help one another in ways that they've never done before.

Bob Lord:

So as a local business, you really can help your community out in a very different way and really reposition your brand, potentially, within the community so that when the pandemic is gone, you're going to actually accelerate. And I actually see that even for IBM. I mean, I see IBM leaning in hard with its clients right now to help them get through this crisis. Because I think at the end of this, we will emerge as a stronger company and have stronger relationships. As a small business owner, I think you want to lean in harder as a brand to help your community and your constituents, your customers, more than you ever have before, whether it's at IBM scale or it's at a local scale.

Simon Mainwaring:

I completely agree. And I mean, the whole thrust of Lead With We is not only business being of service to others, but others being of service to you. And I think tragic as COVID is, it really has shown our best selves and highest purpose when we've all rallied around each other through that community lens. And one of the things I'm excited to talk about today is Call for Code, because it is a celebration of entrepreneurship. So for those who don't know much about it, tell us a little bit about the story of Call for Code.

Bob Lord:

It's a call all out to the 24 million developers and data scientists in the world to use IBM technology and offerings to solve major societal issues. The insight was simple. They didn't want to learn IBM tools. What developers and data scientists want to do in the world is they want to solve problems. And this journey has just been a phenomenal, unbelievable, surprising journey for me. It's probably the most rewarding professional thing I've ever done in my career. So we put the call out. Simon and Ginni Rometty announced it in Paris as a global call to developers and data scientists. We enabled them with tools. We invested over $55 million in the program over a five-year period to enable people. And the first year, we focused it on natural disasters. If you can remember back, there were hurricanes, lots of wildfires going on, and it seemed like people weren't using technology to solve some of those problems.

Bob Lord:

So we launched the program. To our wonderful surprise, we had over 145 countries participate globally. We had Call for Code hackathons all over the world, and we had over 10,000 submissions. We had one winner. The first winner actually was a project called Project OWL, which was activating a hotspot directly after a major event, because communications is the biggest problem you have after a major hurricane event.

Bob Lord:

And then we went further and we said, "You know what? It's not only just winning the idea, but at IBM, we're going to help you implement it." And I took the program another step, and we now have implemented that solution in Puerto Rico. That was the year one winner. And then year two, we again focused on natural disasters. We had a winner out of Barcelona, which was to protect the health of firefighters, because the fires were raging all around the world.

Bob Lord:

And then we launched the third year. We thought we'd take the ambitious goal and look at climate change. What can developers and data scientists do with open source code like Watson and the IBM Cloud and blockchain to really help think through and mitigate the challenges we all have around climate change? And then COVID hit. I remember the team coming to me saying, "My God, we have to do something around COVID." And I just looked at them and I said, "Well, can we do it?" And literally within two weeks we pivot the entire program to add COVID.

And they didn't disappoint, again. Millions of developers and data scientists within a six-week period, we had over 400 ideas submitted on the platform about what to do with COVID, whether it was community response, whether it was communication, whether it's health checks, all these ideas came in from all over the world.

Bob Lord:

Again, I think it was 158 countries now participated in the COVID Call. Everybody wants to do something. Everybody wants to help. And I fundamentally have realized that developers and data scientists are the civil engineers of our time. They are re-architecting how we are doing business and they can re-architect how we solve some of the major societal issues in the world right now.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's extraordinary, what is possible when we kind of all rally around something bigger than ourselves. We're all in the business of staying in business, and even more so during a time of crisis. And there's always this tension between self-interest and doing something for others. So why in a very, very sort of challenging time, would the developer class rise to this challenge? Why would people collaborate in new ways? And then secondly, building on this idea of collaboration, do you see that as a part of the way moving forward? Do you see that collaboration is becoming increasingly important to solving for these larger issues?

Bob Lord:

I fundamentally believe that the power of open source ... There's a power with an open source technology, and they're sort of communities that are virtual communities where technologists contribute. What I have found, and I think now big enterprises are finding, is if you were involved in those open source communities, you get more innovation. If you just think about it logically, the more people that are involved in trying to solve a problem, the more ideas you get and the more innovation you get. And there are business models that can be built on top of open source technology. So you can take the code, and you can make businesses out of them. There's numerous examples of that. The way that communities come together and how they collaborate, Simon, really leads to better innovation. And I just think it's a way that we're going to be doing work going forward.

Simon Mainwaring:

Call for Code is such a powerful global platform through which to do this. You have this line of sight on all of these different examples of collaboration. Is there anything you'd share with everybody listening, just in terms of the principles of collaboration or the mindset that enables it to succeed?

Bob Lord:

Most of these virtual teams that we've been working with with Call for Code ... So the second winner was called COVID Impact, and it was about small businesses understanding whether or not they could get financial means to help them get through the COVID crisis because all the regulations were so confusing. A virtual team came from Canada, Bangladesh and Mexico. And that team was virtually put together, but all of those locally were saying they want to help small businesses somehow. How do they do that? Well, let's create an app so they can answer a couple of questions to see if their local government is going to be able to help them out. Simple app, right? And I think they're being inspired by the core problem itself.

Bob Lord:

Like I said before, these developers and data scientists, they just want to solve problems. That's why they went into the business that they went into. And I think if you give them a really hard problem, they rise to the occasion, whether it's solving a very complex cybersecurity issue, which IBM does all the time with our cybersecurity offering, or whether it's around COVID, helping businesses, make sure they stay afloat.

Simon Mainwaring:

Can you give us a little bit more of the specifics around Project OWL and Prometeo, because it's so powerful what they did?

Bob Lord:

With Project OWL, the insight came from somebody who was in Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. It was a lack of information once the hurricane hit. The kid, who was a kid at the time, wanted to know whether or not his grandmother was alive or not. So he basically took his drone, put a camera on the end of his drone and he flew it over his grandmother's house. And she finally came out and she waved to the drone to say, "I'm safe." So Project OWL came out of, in that four days after a major disaster, how do you light up communications just to get a signal, to know if someone's safe, whether they need water or whether they need medical attention? And what it is is a virtual hotspot. So just like you and I would go into any coffee shop and our phone would connect, that's what it is.

Bob Lord:

For those four days, it's virtually phones setting up a hotspot so that people could communicate together. And we've now run three or four different pilots down there. The last earthquake that was in Puerto Rico, we actually activated the network to use it and check it out with the local communities. Most of these ideas are very simple. They're hard to implement, but they're simple ideas. And we're dedicated to continue to roll that out. Now, the second part of this, which is most important, that idea is put into an open source world, open source community. So those developers, let's say in Osaka, Japan, who have the same problem, they can actually upload that code and they can actually distribute it in Osaka, Japan or anywhere else in the world.

Simon Mainwaring:

So powerful just to be able to deploy it that way, so it has real impact on the ground. And as an Australian who just watched from LA, where I live, with such a heavy heart, the bushfires playing out all around the country, Prometeo, one of the other winners, was really, really meaningful to me. Describe what they were solving for and how they worked with firefighters there.

Bob Lord:

This really was a Watson-enabled IOT device, which rides on a firefighter. And to my surprise, and probably everybody on the team is, these fire management systems were all paper-based and were not very effective. So what Prometeo came through, it was actually an interesting team. It was a nurse. There was a firefighter and two developers who got together, and they came up and they developed an IOT device that sits on someone's clothes and monitors CO_2 and other gas intakes that the firefighter is in at that time and monitors their health so that they get a signal to say, "Come out of the fire now. Take an hour time off and then go back in," and monitor it that way.

Bob Lord:

So we've actually put some controlled fires in place outside of Barcelona. And we're actually now implementing that idea on IBM Watson and IBM Cloud so that we can actually roll it out. The interesting thing about that community is they're very close knit. Any firefighter that happens in a world, most of these firefighters go globally to go help the others out. So I'm hopeful once we get this device instituted, that it will be shared throughout the whole firefighting community.

Simon Mainwaring:

I know that you're focused on climate crisis, obviously COVID. What are some of the issues they could be thinking about? Because these are all marketplace opportunities and they're also needs that need to be solved for.

Bob Lord:

One of the applications that I think is really, really relevant to that is actually the third winner of the COVID challenge, which is called, Are You Well? App. And what it does is it uses Watson and Watson Insights and Watson

Assistant to basically answer a series of questions. Because I think a lot of us now, as sort of the human race, want answers, and we want data behind those answers. Sometimes it's very difficult to trust news outlets that we have, or some of the government things that are coming out. So you really want an informed source. And this app was all about whether or not you had COVID and whether you should go get a test. But that gives somebody a peace of mind, right? Whether or not you really need ... You can sleep better at night if you know you don't have to get tested, or based on these statistics, you shouldn't have to do it. So it's augmenting the mind of the human being with some kind of assistant. So I think there's a lot of opportunity here.

Simon Mainwaring:

And what I'm hearing loud and clear is that there's an incredible opportunity right now because all of these challenges we're facing are problems to be solved for, in an entrepreneurial sense, in a business sense. And to that end, we should collaborate in new ways and think about new partnerships that probably weren't on your radar before. And then there are platforms like Call for Code and so on that allow you literally to plug into this ecosystem of change that allows you to get deployed and scale very, very quickly. What else would you say? What else have you taken away from these last few years of really meaningful impact in terms of how people should think about this moment in time and how they can apply their skills in the most beneficial way?

Bob Lord:

The first principle I think is, as we talked about before, is try to really leverage the open source community, and collaborate with the largest community you can. The winners, at least of the competitions that we've run, has always had a business owner, as well as developers and data scientists together, somebody who's had the experience, has passion about driving to that next solution. I think how we do business together is all up for grabs. Like, what does it mean to be digital? What does it mean to have retail? How do we actually interact with a consumer?

Bob Lord:

And I think there are some really, really great digital experiences that can duplicate real life interactions, and I'm starting to experience that. Whether it's creativity with a product called MURAL, or whether it's a creative use of Slack while you're on WebEx, there's so many different tools that you can use as a business. And I do think that has not been solved yet, how you actually get great human interaction digitally. And I think that some of the cores of that business will be, I think, revamped overall. It's anyone's game. You just need to be inspired and to drive it. I don't think it's going to cost a lot of money to actually start an idea, but you want to be able to scale it through an open source world.

Simon Mainwaring:

I can't thank you enough for the work that IBM's doing and the opportunity for everyone who's listening to participate in Call for Code, to expand their minds now, to see business differently, to really reinvent themselves, to play a role that's going to build their bottom line. Thank you so much for the leadership and insights that you've shared with us today. I hope everyone walks away from this thinking that if we do Lead with We, if we really do think about serving collective interests, that collective engagement can also build your business, it can build your market penetration. It can really drive your growth at the same time, and then, really business does become a force for good in the world. So thank you so much, Bob, a real pleasure to reconnect. And thanks for sharing all the insights today.

Bob Lord:

Thanks Simon. Thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

Simon Mainwaring:

Thanks everyone for listening. And we really hope you enjoyed our time with Bob Lord from IBM today. There's no more powerful example than a large corporate using its scale to literally solve today's greatest challenges. But you can too, no matter the size of your business. So take Bob's advice and think about your business in new ways. Solve for the challenges of our day,and work together in new ways so that you can scale your business growth and impact. There's still a chance to join the 2020 Call for Code global challenge. They're taking submissions all the way through July 31st, focused on climate change and COVID-19, and they'll be announcing global challenge winners in October. And if you'd like to learn more about We First, go to wefirstbranding.com, where you'll see some of the programs we've done for brands just like yours. See you on the next episode of Lead With We.

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