Connections with Leading Thinkers

Jayson Pankin of the AutoHarvest Foundation

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Jayson Pankin is a founder and CEO of the AutoHarvest foundation—a non-profit digital platform for innovators in advanced manufacturing. Launched in 2012, the AutoHarvest interest group consists of more than 300 prominent Research and Development (R&D) and manufacturing organizations from industry, government and academia.

Jayson is a serial entrepreneur who joined his first startup company when he was a student in college. For more than thirty five years, he has been a venture partner specializing in early-stage technology and turnaround situations.

He was ranked as one of World’s Leading Intellectual Property Strategists by the British publication, Intellectual Asset Management for 2014 and 2015.

Jonathan Prosser and Niaz Souti from the Accenture Institute for High Performance (AIHP) spoke to Jayson about open innovation on digital platforms.
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AIHP: It’s a pleasure to speak to you, Jayson. Let’s start by talking about the story behind AutoHarvest and how it works.

Jayson Pankin: Sure. AutoHarvest is a global online meeting place for innovators of all types with an interest in advanced manufacturing intellectual property. The idea of AutoHarvest was incepted several years before it was officially launched in 2012; it as a non-profit organization based in Detroit and Ann Arbor. I like to think of it as a place for “innovation speed-dating.”

As for how it works, innovators of all kinds join the platform and showcase technology opportunities defined as “needs,” “solutions” and “capabilities.” Interested parties then find each other and privately communicate. Once there is interest, parties can create collaboration rooms and invite others from all over the world to join. In this virtual room, they can exchange messages and conduct quick due diligence. Either they virtually shake hands and decide on the next steps, or they go their separate ways.

AIHP: You mentioned the idea of AutoHarvest was incepted years ago. So, why 2012 and not sooner?

Jayson Pankin: Great question. Two key trends:

One is the advent of new technologies and how fast they are being adopted. We now have a great opportunity to harness today’s technologies to work together and innovate in new ways.

Secondly, the growing importance of collaboration in advanced manufacturing. Advanced manufacturing is a broad field, yet there are similarities across the board.

Increasingly, the importance of collaboration is being realized in this space. I believe tomorrow’s complex products are not going to be made by the technologies a large company develops alone under its own roof. Collaboration between different actors, large and small, competitors and partners, is crucial for innovation. And it needs to be done in an unbiased, unfettered way with everyone having a chance to participate in a level playing field; whether grassroots entrepreneurs or corporate titans.

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AIHP: What are some of the benefits of using digital platforms such as AutoHarvest for facilitating innovation?

Jayson Pankin: There are a number of benefits. One of the key ones is enabling collaboration in a democratic way. Digital platforms like AutoHarvest create a level playing field, where large companies with lots of resources, and established brands and networks are working alongside small companies and independent researchers—they are nowhere near the size of these large companies, but have an opportunity to make contact with them. Good ideas come from everywhere. Everyone should have a chance to participate.

Secondly, with these platforms, you can augment the benefits of physical interactions. To elaborate on that, our platform allows interested parties to cast a wide net and filter for the proverbial needle in a haystack. Augmenting the “smart-search”, the system enables members to conduct a quick due diligence on intellectual property opportunities which makes the process of finding innovation partners much more efficient and effective. Only if they think there is something there, they invest time in setting up face-to-face meetings. This is allowing the interested parties to do something that previously took months, plus cost of transportation, hotels, traffic etc., in less than one hour or so.

Also, we have stories of people meeting on AutoHarvest and never knowing they were located one mile from one another. There is magic in serendipitous interactions that happen in the physical space. Digital platforms should not replace these face-to-face interactions but instead supplement them and address their shortcomings to amplify their impact. They should capture a little of that magic and make serendipity routine.
AIHP: Very interesting. Can you speak about some of the challenges?

Jayson Pankin: In the early stages, the biggest challenge was gaining the trust of the first users, especially since the first users didn’t trust each other and were sometimes competitors. AutoHarvest creates an ecosystem around innovation. And every ecosystem is based on trust. You simply can’t create an innovation ecosystem where you have favorites. That’s why AutoHarvest is truly neutral and we plan to keep it this way. Take a look at our board of advisory. We have high ranking executives from all three OEMs of Michigan (that is, Ford, FCA and GM) and Tier 1 Suppliers (Visteon, United Technologies, Delphi and JCI). We also have many users who are small companies and independent researchers.

The second ongoing challenge is around security. AutoHarvest is not where confidential information is shared and details of deals are discussed. We have been working with different security partners, but at the end of the day, the system is hackable—just like any other piece of technology. AutoHarvest enables the introductions, preliminary discussions and efficient due diligence. But at some point, things have to be taken offline and follow established protocols to exchange confidential information.

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AIHP: AutoHarvest is the first in its kind and quite successful. Do you anticipate facing competition from other companies, especially for-profit ones?

Jayson Pankin: This could very well be an emerging field. There are always players out there looking for ways to connect people. But I don’t view them as our competitors. Our end goal is helping individuals and companies solve complex problems and advance their careers. The way I see it is the more players are doing something similar, the better for everyone.

AIHP: Thank you for your time, Jayson. This was a very insightful discussion.
As part of the Accenture Institute for High Performance’s mission to develop cutting-edge new ideas and insights, researchers often seek the views of academic leaders, business executives and industry analysts. The Connections with Leading Thinkers series captures some of those interviews, showcasing interactions and discussions with some of the world’s leading experts.

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