HOW THE PURSUIT OF INNOVATION BECAME A QUEST FOR LONG–TERM SUSTAINABILITY – AND THE MAN LEADING THE CHANGE REGIONALLY

A PROFILE ON RAYMOND SZABADA
BY CHONA FE CANLAS

Raymond Szabada heads the i-Open Group of Companies, a leader and provider of geospatial applications and SaaS solutions. He is passionate about leadership and developing advanced technologies that can deliver value and long-term sustainability.

Creator

Sometimes, the things behind great success are not what you expect. So many factors and systems have to come together to bring an idea to life. In the case of Raymond Szabada, President, CEO and Founder of the i-Open Group of Companies based in Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada, drivers like innovation and sustainability play a massive role in forming progress and unparalleled performance.

Throughout his entrepreneurial career, Ray has focused on progression through leading-edge technologies. As part of this methodology, he exerts a keen focus on several corporate philosophies like 'communication, process & achieving continuous progress'. As an industry leader, Ray emphasizes accountability at the center of his leadership mentality. He believes that key management personnel need to be the most responsible, as, without proper direction, it becomes more challenging to accomplish goals - big and small. That's why Ray's approach has been vital to his companies' success. He leads with accountability, and his team is quick to learn how i-Open's solutions are pushing toward innovation and long-term sustainability. The group is passionate about contributing to success, learning about expectations along the way. There is also an emotional component, one other attribute Ray hopes to explore with all of his companies over time.

Trying to delve into the emotional aspect of a successful tech company can be challenging, but i-Open's products, like Agrilyze, cater to an audience's insights, emotions and behaviours, not just to the

product itself. The Group aims to teach prospects more about significant business problems, new ideas, and astute insights. Then, the ultimate goal becomes a question of having people attached, not only to the brands but to the underlying value of simply, Doing More with Less. This subtle interpretation makes i-Open's technologies innovating – without fear of failure while being accountable, perseverant and developing instinct and experience over time. Emotions are a crucial aspect in business and Ray makes it a point to regularly inspire his management team with a 'manage the process, not the task' approach. Standing firm Ray elaborates, "Emotions, insights, behaviours, these are critical requirements for success in business."

Innovator

Throughout the life of the i-Open Group of Companies, Ray has guided his team through tough challenges. Challenges like balancing the risks and rewards of Ai, data governance, security and privacy, and assisting Enterprise-level companies with digital transformation. He has come out on the other side more reliable than ever with the more recent launch of i-Open's product lines within the agriculture and construction industry. These companies fulfil i-Open's goal to diversify its footprint both locally and internationally. Leveraging the latest Ai technologies and the existing spatial and proven platforms with more recent paradigms in change detection, machine learning and satellite imagery, the i-Open Group has been instrumental in introducing two innovative product lines – Agrilyze for Precision Agriculture and the bidworX solution for solving complex challenges within the construction project estimating domain. Both are highly scalable and flexible while targeting efficiency, cost reduction

and bottom-line – process automation. So, the future of i-Open relies on Ray's mission to consistently deliver value and technology solutions for the betterment of the BC economy.

Recently representing the Fraser Valley region, Ray spoke more on this at Globe 2020, a sustainable business summit and innovation showcase saying, "Going forward, everything we develop as an organization will focus on delivering real and sustainable high-tech solutions for a better planet. Our focus excites me because you cannot get any cleaner than high-tech; it is our attempt at non-invasive, clean industrialization for our region." Success in this domain requires critical mass both from a local and international standpoint and at this stage, Ray is focusing on motivating his peers and the local municipalities to see the larger picture - his vision for the Valley as it relates to a knowledge-based clean economy.

Influencer

Further to his vision, Ray is demonstrating his leadership and influence as the driving force behind XLRator, a social enterprise which Ray founded and has personally funded over the past ten years. XLRator is an organization committed to building a thriving tech ecosystem in the Fraser Valley. Formerly known as SRCTec, XLRator was formed based on Ray's vision that technology could be the most significant driving force within the BC economy. As business and living costs in the greater Vancouver area become less feasible, opportunities will arise for the Valley to populate and industrialize at a rapid rate. The XLRator team has been gaining momentum, developing the infrastructure, workforce strategies and, most importantly, a tech ecosystem in the form of clean industrialization that

is a non-invasive, knowledge-based digital economy.

Ray has urged the local municipal, provincial and federal governments to recognize the region resulting in XLRator's launch of the province's first AgTech program in 2016. This program generated substantial regional developments over the last four years and since inception has supported over 50 new tech startups and multiple other programs to foster the development and support of a now growing local tech economy. The ecosystem includes three very successful annual Regional Tech Forums, coding programs and an ongoing series of events, workshops and tech mixers. More recently the Chilliwack.Tech group became the first satellite chapter of the XLRator organization, and plans are underway toward the formation of a Tri-Cities chapter in the city of Port Coquitlam.

Recent research reports that by 2020, 75% of organizations will experience visible business disruptions due to infrastructure and operations skills gaps, which is a substantial increase from less than 20% in 2016. (Heltzel, 2018) XLRator is Ray's way of addressing this issue. By reaching out to the community, local schools and colleges and creating a greater focus on the importance of technology, XLRator is extending valuable training and mentorship to those wanting to speed up their role in digital transformation. Ray is a staunch advocate of contributing hundreds of hours of volunteer time to this project and other community services, including the development of an At-Risk Youth project, which kicked-off in 2018 in partnership with the Abbotsford Mission Boxing Club. The effort has helped to keep kids off the street; from this angle, we can see that Ray's vision is multi-layered, impacting his company's performance, as well as the surrounding community.

Thought Leader

And so, the vision comes first as it guides Ray's overall drive and motivation. Still, a major focus is on the planet. Ray explains, "It is crucial to create solutions that will improve our planet. From our continued exposure delivering solutions to the resources sector, we realize technology's role with regards to damage prevention, protection of the environment, safety regulations and reporting. In essence, our company is a citizen that lives, works and shares the planet. Ultimately, we can define our identity in the form of a 'Good Citizen'. As a 'Good Company', we will leverage machine learning, change detection and the latest technologies for deploying artificial intelligence. This interaction and management of solutions will be our corporate theme – CitizenAi."

Ray continues, "CitizenAi is a suite of products that delivers value to corporate entities, governments and educational institutions. This concept aims to solve real-world challenges like food shortage and food security, traceability and damage prevention. It also focuses on mitigating environmental risk and staying compliant. As a good corporate citizen and a group of companies, we want to do good things. We build technologies and this way, we know we are contributing toward the greater good."

Based on this corporate vision, Citizen Ai could be an answer to many problems. By analyzing large volumes of data at a high frequency and rate and tying in the integration of data collected by multiple systems (i.e., spatial imagery), we can offer advanced, leading-edge solutions to various local and international markets. Ray believes that many companies are employing a similar approach, but the i-Open difference is – we are leveraging over 15

years of experience in this space, and we can tie these developing paradigms into our Spatially Enabled Ai (SEA) suite of applications.

Visionary

The technology sector is highly competitive due to the presence of a large number of big and small players. Competition is prompting companies like i-Open to update themselves and incorporate innovative branding into their business model. If companies are not up-to-date with the latest technologies and brand awareness strategies, then it is highly likely that their operations will become obsolete in the long run, putting their survival in the market at stake.

Leveraging the existing and proven spatial technology platforms that i-Open has introduced to the municipal government and energy sectors, the CitizenAi model can become the behaviourally scientific version of i-Open's current spatial and map-based, fully-integrated solutions. Ray shares, "Artificial Intelligence will become central to solving humanity's biggest challenges. Solutions by CitizenAi will respond to this. Together, we can capitalize on the unprecedented quantities of data (spatial and non-spatial), and recent progress in emerging Ai solutions."

The Future

Ray's positive and forward-thinking outlook provides his team with room to develop long-term intellectual acuity while continuing to pound out innovative solutions. When it comes to revenue-generating opportunities, Ray focuses on diversification, while digitizing his companies into an automated platform at scale.

Ray adds, "We need to stay focused on driving costs out of business, scaling from a go-to-market perspective and diversifying." The world's biggest tech companies are all in on diversification – it is often the difference between success and domination.

Like Ray, real players stay up-to-date with evolving customer demands and focus on building new solutions to meet their requirements. Companies that are in tune with customers' emotions are also at an advantage. So, Ray will continue to lead and has no plans to relinquish his desire for progress anytime soon. He wishes to write a book explaining the trials and tribulations of his experiences from childhood, his career and, most importantly, his beliefs and values. He figures the critical ideas behind his chapters are good, but has written only a few pages as he struggles to find time to sit down and focus. He left us with his favourite quote, "When I dare to be powerful — to use my strength in the service of my vision and my principles, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid." — Audre Lorde, New York, 1979.

To which I say: Ray is fearlessly taking technology to new places by bringing his vision to life and never compromising on principles and values. He drives his passion for changing the world on what he knows best – delivering technology products. The journey toward understanding the role of innovation is laying down the proper foundations so that together, we can work toward a knowledge-based and clean digital economy. Our dedication will drive the tech industry to promote more sustainable products. We only have one planet, let's make it stronger – with the CitizenAi concept, the quest for long-term sustainability is Ray's pursuit, right here in the Fraser Valley.