

Inside Innovation

An interview with Ty Beltramo, Chief Innovation Officer of Tweddle Group.



Ty Beltramo
Chief Innovation Officer
Tweddle Group

TWEDDLE
GROUP

IIC Partners interviewed Ty Beltramo, Chief Innovation Officer, on managing creative teams, aligning emerging trends with business strategy and product development and keeping a leading innovative edge against the competition.

What does a Chief Innovation Officer do?

The CIO is all about culture and progress. That means crafting a culture that generates creativity, energy, and fearlessness. It has to be safe to fail fast, and unsafe to fail slowly. Experimentation, learning, and wild thinking are fostered when people believe they are safe to try things and challenge current thinking. Creative energy must be channeled in a strategic direction and progress must be measured. The CIO has to create the explicit bridge between the daily activities of the team and the innovations that matter to the company. I am responsible for Product Strategy/Development and Engineering Technology departments, which distinguishes my role from that of the traditional CTO, which might run only engineering. In the case of other CIOs, they may be responsible for innovation, as described above, but for all areas of the company and not just technology products.

How would you describe your leadership style?

Build a great culture and maintain an environment that enables people to thrive together, take risks, and have clarity of purpose. These values drive my activities and relationships. This means being directive and very hands-on in the beginning, but once

the machinery is in place and working, it means doing less hands-on and more guiding and tuning. I don't seek to be liked, but when you value people and their futures, and you make your job about the product and not about yourself, people will respect you. I always try to be calm and optimistic. A strong work-life balance is important to me, and I like to see it be important to everyone in the company.

“Excellent managers must be able to identify the right trade-offs, and have the courage to take them...”

What are the biggest challenges you face as Chief Innovation Officer?

Scope. Innovation is a momentum game. To build and maintain momentum, you must ensure there is no friction in your teams, processes, or technologies. If you fail in any one of the three main pieces of your engine (teams, processes and technologies), innovation will be hampered.

Presence. It's easy for poor time management and confused priorities to drag the CIO away from his or her team, resulting in its degeneration. CIOs need to spend a lot of time physically and psychologically with their teams, inserting themselves in the midst of the action to continually reinforce the CIO's values within the team.

Diplomacy and Trade. Collaboration with other companies is a key source of new genetic material and new ways of thinking. We select partners that can teach us things, and we build ideas together. This also means that you have to embrace the frenemy: the company that may, at times, alternate between partner and competitor. These dynamics can be tricky but profitable. Competition raises the bar for everyone and earned mutual respect arises from the tension and combats complacency.

What is one piece of advice you would give an aspiring Chief Innovation Officer?

Innovation is very multi-dimensional and hard to master in practice. Study (on-site if possible) the most successfully innovative teams (in any industry) that you can find. Get to know them, what they do, and why. Then get to know your own business and teams intimately so you can translate the application of what you've learned. Never forget that innovation is a means to an end where the true objective is progress that makes you win.

What skills do you need to have in order to be a Chief Innovation Officer?

In my case, the CIO is a combination of the CTO and Head of Product Development roles. The best CIOs possess the skills of both and realize that they need to succeed in these areas through their direct reports. A CIO must align emerging technologies and trends, and use these to inform the corporate business strategy, and derive a detailed product and engineering roadmap to enable the business plan. A great CIO must lead peers and subordinates through influence. This means being a great communicator, listener and compromiser.



“ Innovation is a means to an end where the true objective is progress - *that makes you win...* ”



What do you look for when hiring managers?

Honesty, integrity, humility, logic and empathy in people whose loyalty is to their peers first and team second. Excellent managers must be able to identify the right trade-offs, and have the courage to take them. Find people who make the whole team perform better. These are the skilled but humble ones who will take time to invest in their junior teammates. Hire people who find fulfillment in the importance of the work and in the success of building something.

What can leaders do to foster collaboration and innovation?

Empires go to war and silos become isolated. The simple solution to both of these syndromes is to train leaders to value the success of their peers as the first order of business. Leaders must evaluate people primarily on how they contribute to the success of their peers.

Remove fear as a motivator. Everyone is motivated by fear, but this creates a great deal of collateral damage to an organisation. Personal performance must be managed, but not through fear.

Over communicate and provide clarity about what the team is doing, why they are doing it and how it all fits together. Make

every step in a process count for something that's important to the business.

Can you describe the career path that took you to the role of Chief Innovation Officer?

Becoming a Chief Innovation Officer was made possible by the fortunate intersection of the roles I've played and the industries in which I've worked. After developing a strong tech foundation as a software engineer, my career pivoted into a series of roles where technological re-invention and innovation were of primary importance to success. My experiences at Rockwell, OnStar, Tele Atlas and MapQuest, combined with my knowledge of the automotive industry, equipped me to become the Chief Innovation Officer at Tweddle Group.

How does a company become a leader in innovation and not fall behind competitors?

I think the answer to becoming a leader and staying a leader is the same. The attitude you must adopt is that you are competing with yourself, beating your past self. If you keep that perspective, you'll never get complacent. Complacency manifests stagnation. Microsoft and General Motors became complacent and lost their pole positions in their respective industries because, once they were in the lead, they stopped driving.

“ The attitude you must adopt is that you are *competing with yourself*, beating your past self. If you keep that perspective, you'll never get complacent... ”



What trends are you seeing from consumers in the automotive industry and how do those trends drive innovation?

Consumers' expectations of connectivity and infotainment are being set by their mobile devices. They are increasingly dissatisfied by in-dash navigation, satellite radio, and add-on packages for data to/from the vehicle. Head-units are unable to catch up in terms of power, data, cost effectiveness and user interface controls. This is leading to innovation in how a vehicle becomes a part of the connected experience. Instead of being the center of the driving experience, it is becoming peripheral and secondary to the connected experience.

Data is also becoming king. Original Equipment Manufacturers are increasingly installing head-units that come with data connectivity (via cell), at their own expense, so they can have access to the behavioral data generated by the vehicle. This data is extremely valuable for diagnostics, prognostics, and quality improvement. This will result in lower cost and much higher customer satisfaction. Finding ways to capitalize on this data is becoming a new focus for innovation.

What is your perspective on the current state of the automotive industry?

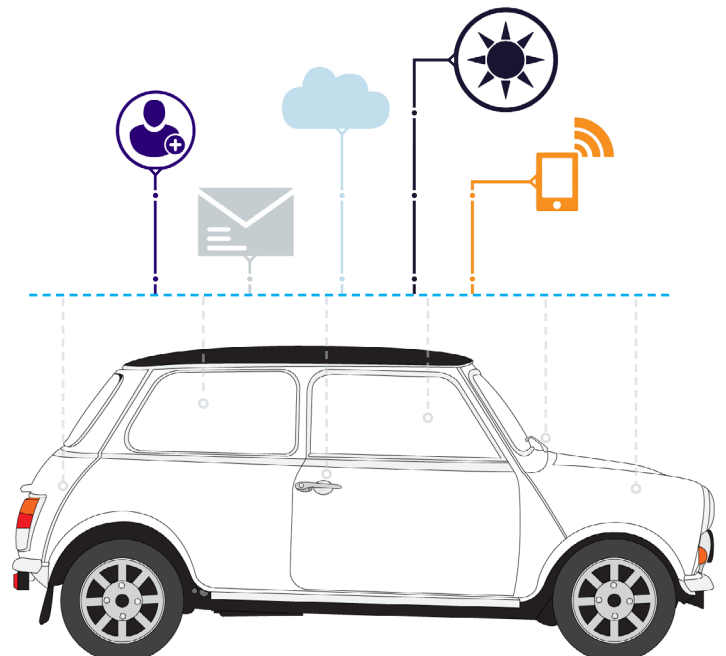
The automotive industry is poised for a revolution in autonomous vehicles in the near future, and is making massive contributions to safety today. As the tech and auto industries converge, the fast-paced experimenting and risk-accepting culture of the tech industry will break down the traditional, monolithic, non-agile ways and means of the auto industry. The auto industry will have to adapt to the consumer electronics industry's product lifecycle, measured in weeks and months instead of years. In short, the tech industry is framing the conversation with and setting the expectations of consumers. This pressure will drive the auto industry to break through barriers to fuel innovation.

How does the Chief Innovation Officer interface with other areas of the business to create innovative solutions?

First, the CIO's first priority is the success of his peers: CBDO, CFO, COO. This breaks down the barriers between departments. The CIO's product development team is responsible for working with business development, sales and operations as key stakeholders in product strategy. They weave together competing values, desires, capabilities from engineering, and the vision from other senior leaders into a coherent product strategy. As product features are prioritized and constructed, the key stakeholders inspect the progress and provide feedback for course corrections. Product lifecycle is reviewed regularly against the company strategy and changing business climate. Transparency is also crucial for successful collaboration and development. We construct our technical backlogs in the language of business and give everyone access, so it is clear, at any moment, what is being developed and what is next.



“ The tech industry is framing the conversation with and setting the expectations of consumers. This pressure will drive the auto industry to break through barriers to *fuel innovation...* ”



What is one company that you see as a true leader in innovation?

Tesla. They are breaking all the rules to make a great product anyone would love to drive. It seems like you can't close your eyes without them doing something unexpected and great (like turning their car into an autonomous vehicle by upgrading only the software).

What contribution has executive search made to your career?

I have been placed in two roles through executive search. I wouldn't have had those opportunities without executive search. I have also learned a great deal regarding what companies are looking for in an executive. Being largely in the technology field my whole career, it has been difficult to understand the less technical side of business. My role as CTO at MapQuest was the first time all my peers were non-technical business people.

This interview was conducted by IIC Partners with special thanks to Harvey Hohausser & Associates and the Tweddle Group. For more features, articles, reports and thought leadership please visit www.iicpartners.com.

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