



Rhode Island news

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BIF founder Saul Kaplan speaks at the Business Innovation Factory annual confab in Providence.

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PROVIDENCE — Great minds may think alike, but they may not know it unless they stumble into a “happy accident” that brings them together.

That notion is the subtext for a two-day conference, under way at the Lederer Theater downtown, where business executives, authors, designers and others are gathered for the annual Collaborative Innovation Summit.

“One encounter prepares you for the next,” said Eric Bonabeau, an expert on “swarm” intelligence and founder of Icosystem Corp.

During a 15-minute presentation yesterday at the summit, Bonabeau explained the fortuitous events that led him to his latest endeavor.

A friendship struck up in high school challenged him to think in creative ways about the nature of intelligence, he said, and years later, a chance encounter with an ecologist taught him about the power of collective thought. That led to the creation and recent launch of an example of swarm intelligence called the “Hunch Engine,” a computer search engine for finding information when you don’t really know what it is that you are looking for, he said.

Now, Bonabeau is finding out whether his hunches about thinking and innovation will find acceptance among others.

“You have to test the ideas in the real world,” Saul Kaplan, executive director of the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation, said yesterday during a break in the summit.

Kaplan launched the Business Innovation Factory, which hosts the Collaborative Innovation Summit, shortly after he arrived at the EDC, in 2003. A nonprofit organization financed in part by the EDC and in part by private industry, the innovation factory helps businesses offer new products in Rhode Island.

“We can use Rhode Island as the experiment,” Kaplan said.

The innovation factory brings together business leaders and entrepreneurs to foster discussions about innovation.

One of the ways it does that is by hosting the annual summit in Providence, now in its third year.

The two-day conference is designed as a catalyst to get local business people, educators and government officials working together to come up with new ways to do business in Rhode Island. This year’s event is at the Lederer, home of the Trinity Repertory Company.

The innovation factory has four “experience laboratories,” according to Kaplan, focusing on patient care, port security, student life and consumers. The laboratories aren’t actual places, but collaboratives of companies, institutions and people focused on those topics, he said.

“We wanted the Business Innovation Factory to be a neutral platform,” Kaplan said.

An example is a project dubbed “The Resuscitation Bay of the Future.” Through it, a handful of Rhode Island organizations are collaborating to redesign emergency-room treatment bays — the shelving, the tables, the gurneys and the small diagnostic devices — that could save people’s lives.

“This is collaboration with a purpose,” Kaplan said. “This is a demonstration that we can mobilize a community of innovators.”

The project brought together ITEM Group, Lifespan, Brown University, the University Emergency Medicine Foundation and the Business Innovation Factory.

First known as a designer of toys and sporting goods, Providence-based ITEM also redesigns industrial products. Typically, the company’s designers push commercial and industrial manufacturers to put more time and money into the look and feel of their products. The thinking is that retooled products can do a better job of catching a customer’s eyes, be easier to use and potentially save money in the process.

Today, Stephen Lane, ITEM’s cofounder and chief executive officer, will explain to an audience at the theater how the treatment-bay project came about, and how it resulted in a cohesive redesign of an emergency room’s basic tools.

The treatment bays in emergency rooms tend to be cluttered with medical equipment, some portable, some not. Medical supplies are stacked on shelves or stored in drawers, often without regard to how they are used in a typical day, he said. And storage systems can vary from hospital to hospital, making standardization impossible.

“It’s shockingly overdue,” Lane said. “It already has a successful cousin three floors away in the surgical suite.”

Hospitals began rethinking surgical procedures years ago, he said. Redesigned operating rooms followed.

The emergency room, which he labeled a “gateway” to hospitals, was ignored.

Health-care economics are now forcing hospitals to rethink other ways to deliver medical care, he said.

“This idea was not a good idea 15 years ago,” Lane said.

The idea “floated” around at ITEM for a couple of years before the company could connect with the right groups to get it started, he said.

Financing for the project came from the Innovation Factory, ITEM, Brown, Lifespan and the University Emergency Medicine Foundation. Together, they contributed \$150,000, staff time and services to the effort. “It certainly tied into [Kaplan’s] idea of innovation at scale,” Lane said. “The only thing we set out to do was to confirm and validate that we really could point to a solution.”

They took a long time figuring out how to help doctors and nurses do their work in a flash.

ITEM’s workers spent more than 200 hours talking with emergency-room personnel or watching them at work to learn how medical teams operate in their fast-paced, stressful environment.

They used that research to create a nearly full-size model of a treatment bay inside ITEM’s Providence office. Shelving and patient gurneys in the mockup are color coded to make it easier for doctors and nurses to find the supplies they need in a hurry. In the ITEM prototype, gurneys take an evolutionary leap forward to become “command central,” that can carry medical information along with patients.

The prototype will allow ITEM and its collaborators to invite hospital administrators, medical-equipment suppliers, architects and others to see what the possibilities are for emergency treatment.

“We have all of these things that we can touch and feel,” Lane said.

The expectation is that those discussions will lead to further design improvements and new products to fit the new model. From there, perhaps, a national standard for treatment-bay design could evolve, Lane said.

“There is not a company today that is motivated to do this,” Lane said. “An awful lot of people have to look at something and say ‘I believe that’s a better direction.’ ”

Lane, Kaplan and the others involved in the trauma-bay project said one or two of those people could be in the audience at this week’s summit.

The event, which continues today, is not limited to Rhode Islanders. It features speakers from various industries and disciplines. Among this year’s speakers are: Mark Cuban, owner of the National Basketball Association’s Dallas Mavericks franchise and founder of the Internet company Broadcast.com; William Herp, founder of air-taxi service Linear Air; and Stephen Johnson, author of *The Ghost Map: The Story of London’s Most Terrifying Epidemic and How it Changed Science, Cities and the Modern World*.

The speakers get 15 minutes each to describe how they, or their companies, come up with new work methods, ideas and products.

In addition to the storytelling, the annual summit is set up with large blocks of time included for networking.

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