The Corporate Innovation Podcast

Episode 16: An AI Futurist in the C-suite?

Guest: Brian Solis, 8x bestselling author, digital anthropologist and Global Innovation Evangelist at Salesforce in conversation with Kris Østergaard on the concept of employing an AI futurist and how to navigate the Post-Corona world also dubbed as the Novel Economy by Brian.

Episode Highlights:

- **1:28** Brian's take on the pandemic from an innovation & business perspective
- **4:30** Rise of ethics in business in a pandemic
- **8:23** What has changed now vs then?
- **12:03** What is the novel economy?
- **16:04** What is an AI Futurist?
- **22:33** Can businesses implement an AI Futurist?
- **26:36** How to kickstart an AI friendly company?

Kris: So we're here on the Corporate Innovation podcast, and today I'm speaking with Brian Solis. Brian is a global innovation evangelist at Salesforce. He's an eight times best selling author, global keynote speaker, digital anthropologist, futurist, and named one of the most creative and brilliant business minds of our time by Forbes. So first off, welcome on the podcast, Brian.

Brian: You know, I am always uncomfortable hearing my little introductions, but thank you so much for having me. It's really cool to be here.

1:28

Kris: Yeah, well, it's not too shabby. So you should be happy about that! I'm excited to have you here because we have some really interesting and highly newsworthy stuff to speak about, I think. Because we're talking about the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and what you call the novel economy, that we're going to unfold a little bit. And as well as some possible solutions, which is one of them, you are talking about employing an AI Futurist.

And so all of this stuff we're gonna cover here in the next 30 minutes or so. But if we sort of start from the top, we are now in the middle of June and obviously the world is in different levels of lockdown here. We have a global pandemic. So from an innovation and business perspective, what's your take on the pandemic now and how we move forward?

Brian: At the end of the day, in the list of accomplishments that one has in life in a time like this, What should be front and center is the fact that what we're really talking about is just being human, because I don't know that, I don't know that enough of that conversation has sort of happened around humanity the way that it should. And unfortunately, it's just a sign of the times.

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So to open up on a somber note, I'm speaking to you from the United States and it might be the largest place on Earth where people would debate you as to whether or not there really is a pandemic and it's a sad state of affairs. I've watched a series of citizen debates to their city council in Southern California yesterday making the argument to open the city without requiring masks.

And the arguments that were made were based on just absolute conspiracy theories or just ignorance or arrogance or all of the above, in that the science shows that if we just wore a mask, if 100% of us wore masks for three weeks, it would completely decimate the virus. Yet people can't be bothered to do their part to wear a mask. It's unreal.

So with that said, there is a great deal to understand about the personal side of this pandemic and how it's affecting not only the economy, but also the society or our society. And it's those things that humanity that I look at. It's not just digital anthropology, but now just social science in general that is inspiring a lot of thinking here in what innovation can mean and then also what what human centered innovation could mean as well.

4:30

Kris: Yeah, I think that's really interesting, human centered innovation and is my plan for us also to get a little bit more back to talking about ethics and you're already touching upon it if you're in the very beginning, right, and that the mix of, you know, human AI and I mean, who gets to decide.

Speaking about AI futurists and in a little bit, that's going to be part of the conversation as well. And so I'm curious what you think about that, that we see so many of these sort of digital, if you like, trends accelerating here in after the pandemic sort of struck. But I also think I see that in regards to ethics and the notion of and the need for organizations to be even more ethical and even more aware about that. Do you see that similarly?

Brian: Yes. So this is where I think things get really interesting, is that at the executive level or let's just say decision makers, you have right now governing the organizational maneuvers is most likely the CFO and then the CEO is being held accountable to how well the company adapts, right? So we know that there's going to be losses. It's just can we limit them or can we pivot and find ways for growth in these times?

When you're operating like that and so reactively, it's really difficult to see the humanity of any conversation. And when you can't see humanity, then ethics is just not at the top of the list yet. Ethics is absolutely necessary when we start to talk about automation, which is on a separate track. If we look at digital transformation, for example, automation is soaring to the top of the list as a probable solution to help organizations scale.

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For example, there was an airline I was part of the automation anywhere press conference the other day and an example was shared that an airline shortly after the pandemic struck and shutdowns happened had to process as many as 4000 refunds a day.

And on average, before COVID-19, it was about 500 refunds or cancelations a day. So the only way to do that was through automation, right. And you're not thinking really about anything other than how do we implement this? How do we go? And then what's the next problem we have to solve ? But what you're asking is, is actually greater something something deeper to think about.

And this is where I want to challenge executives and to remind them that, yes, this is a pandemic. Yes, this is absolute disruption. It is not the last disruption. And we are where we have to start making some really strategic decisions now about where we want to be in six months, 12 months, 18 months, 24 months and so on. Essentially, we have to start planning strategically. We have to have one track dedicated to responding. We have to stabilize. We have to ensure business continuity. But everybody's got to do that.

So what are we going to do that's going to help us grow A.I machine learning, deep learning. And you know what? If you want to call it blackbox AI, where were we specifically developing algorithms to solve or think about or or analyze specific data patterns for a desired outcome? These are important things and the ethics that have to ensure this fair and balanced approach to how humanity is thinking so that we're not singling any group out and that we're providing fairness and equality to all. But these are big conversations that I think hopefully, like you and I talking about it is going to even get on the radar screen of executives everywhere.

8:23

Kris: Mm hmm. And so looking at the situation right now and you also striking up, so what do executives need to think about? I mean, what's the difference right now after the pandemic hit? And nobody really knows how long this process is gonna be before we get back to something that might be more normal, if that is to work with meaning. So what do you see is different now than, let's say, four or five months ago?

Brian: I think what's different now is the fact that, you know, if you've ever watched a movie where somebody is rambling on and and their friend grabs him by the shoulders and shakes him and says, hey, hey, man, listen. Well, listen. That's, I think, what the world just did to us, that we were shook into some sense of awareness or the need to be aware right now.

And my inspiration at this moment is to take advantage of it and say, hey, let us think differently about how we move forward. Right. Because I think the closest that we're getting to this conversation externally here is that we refer to it as the new normal or the next normal, which is

fine. Right. But I can tell you that psychologically, deep down, there are a lot of decision makers or executives out there who probably want to see us get to some sense of normalcy moving forward. It's why it's business, you know, business continuity. Let's move forward with business as usual.

And the reality is that we are not going back to normal and look, honestly normal as it was, was part of the problem to begin with. So we should take this time and be grateful for it.

To say, what can we do differently moving forward? How can we be better? How can we be greater? We entered this pandemic in this state and we are going to be in this state later on so that we motivate, we turn it into a positive.

And so this is where the term novel economy was born. And we can talk about it in a little bit. But to specifically answer your question, we now need to think about this. You know, the role of a futurist or futureology is essentially scenario planning, right? So let's answer your question.

How long will we be in this? Nobody knows. So let's think about it. Let's use data. Let's use patterns. And let's come up with a few different scenarios so that we can strategize around them and be prepared.

And I'll be quick in just this last part here, which is we can assume that until there's a universal treatment or there's a vaccine, that we're going to still operate largely disrupted for at least the next 18 months, even if a vaccine was given to us tomorrow, it's going to take a while to implement. You have people who say they refuse to take it. It's going to delay herd immunity.

So it's still we have to plan for the next 18 to 24 months of operating in this time of disruption. So plan around that. Plan around it. Something happening sooner. Plan around it. Something happened later. Plan around Donald Trump being reelected. Plan around Donald Trump not being reelected. These have global impacts. We should also scenario plan around Mother Nature and what happens in times of localized disruption. We now need to not just be future proof. We also now have to be disruption proof.

12:03

Kris: Mm hmm. And is that what is at the core of the novel economy? If you were to describe what lies behind that terminology.

Brian: I think so. The reason why I was inspired to think critically about the novel economy, or at least these quote unquote uncertain times, was that in every conversation that I've had in the new normal is essentially normal.

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Now, in terms of how we refer to this time, but it wasn't concrete enough for me to think about, well, how are we going to plan for the new normal? So I wanted to think structurally, how could we say, break out this time into a series of phases that would allow us to mobilize and plan and grow and realize that the one thing that medical professionals talk about when it when they refer to the novel coronavirus is the fact that what makes what gives it its very name is that its novel means new and unusual.

There is no playbook for the response. There is no treatment. There is no vaccine for it. There is no real sort of global or unified plan to address it. There are some best practices from other sorts of diseases that we've learned from.

But for the most part, everybody was sort of reacting to it in its own way. And I'd like to send a shout out to New Zealand and its prime minister for basically eradicating it. That is an exemplary set of operational procedures that the rest of the world should start to document and create that playbook for the next time.

But we don't have that in business. We don't have a playbook. We'd have case studies. We don't have best practices. So the novel economy was basically saying as of March 1st, let's just say that the world began its new economy. It started in a recession. It started with a global pandemic. It's going to be with us for at least 18 to 24 months.

We're not in a post-COVID world, we are in a COVID world now so the novel economy. Then I broke out into three phases, which was stabilization. So it's a reaction to the crisis, stabilize, ensure business continuity. Phase one is to survive, phase two is alive - to build and secure and operate operationalized for this transition state, right.

So don't don't think about this as trying to get a sense of normalcy. Think about this as a pivot and as a growth opportunity that you're laying the foundation for what's next. And phase three, that is innovation, which is to thrive in what is, you know, the next Normal's business continuity looks like so that we can be better than that.

So it's a sort of a combination of iteration and innovation, whereas iteration is saying, hey, let's do these things, let's invest in new technologies, let's stabilize, but let's make it better. And then innovation is let's find new ways to create new value. And I see them as parallel tracks.

16:04

Kris: Mm hmm. And maybe that also brings us to the discussion about an AI futurist and how to properly prepare for future slash, possibly invent a future. So what is an AI futurist?

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Brian: Well, the idea was born, and so at Salesforce, we have a division called the Einstein team that's exploring artificial intelligence. And there's a division of the team that's just focused on incredible, incredible AI related research. And one of the programs that they recently introduced is called The AI Economist and The AI Economist was a simulation based on economic data that played out in sort of the form of a game to see if it couldn't investigate new tax policies that were fair, more equal for all.

And what was so interesting about it was that they were able to come up with policy recommendations that seemed to at least initially surpass those of existing standard processes that exist today and the results that they have produced up until now.

So it is not conclusive. But if anything, it was meant to demonstrate the possibility for it. And when I read that research, I thought, wow, what if we did the same sort of modeling for an AI futurist and the inspiration was coming back to that date of March 1st.

I used that date not because it's an exact date, but it's just sort of metaphorical. Let's just say stake in the ground that says that that's pretty much when the world started to dramatically change overnight. We started to see shut downs. We started to see people sort of reacting emotionally, kicked off the novel economy and saying that from this moment on, all behaviors are going to change.

So that means that, for example, if you want to look at customer experience or e-commerce, the behaviors could then be tracked. How are people making decisions digitally? Where they going? What are they buying? What are they spending? What are they not spending? What messages are connecting with them from companies? What's not connecting with them? And you take all of that data essentially, and you put it into a machine that allows for analysis and then also insights, because it's June, we're three months into this and already, if you were to study data patterns, you would see just how much the world has changed already.

But I can tell you that executives aren't keeping up with that because they have so many other things to do to keep that business going. So the idea but a futurist was essentially to put a black box in the C suite to strategically develop it with the algorithms that we're going to track this new data, we could just assume that everything we had before was useless, we could analyze it in real time, start making decisions around those scenario planning exercises that we did or that we should do to then tell us which scenario is looking like the one.

Or maybe we use them to inform new scenarios. But the point was that we need help to analyze this data now so we can make decisions moving forward. Because I can tell you, no, no gut instinct is going to work when you have no experience operating in a pandemic.

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Kris: Yeah, it's interesting. And I mean, certainly the pandemic has accelerated a lot of things. And as you are saying, change the game in many, many different ways. And even before that, because before the accelerating technologies, etc, the whole notion of creating a blockbuster or whatever that is, that we used to take years and months, weeks. And at a certain point, you know, you're gonna see depending, of course, on industries, just, you know, you blockbusters potentially coming up even, you know, by the minute or by the second etc.

I mean, how to even keep up with that without having AI at the core of analysis, market research and modeling and finding patterns, et cetera, et cetera. So it seems to me also that this is also being accelerated by the pandemic here.

Brian: Oh, absolutely. I mean, you just nailed it and you think about organizational relationships with data coming into the pandemic, I mean, it wasn't great at all. And we all talked about silos being normal, but data itself was a silo. In fact, the data wasn't necessarily clean or complete in its own right.

So it didn't necessarily in most organizations have someone who is responsible, thinking about data cross functionally ensuring that there was data hygiene and that that data was already being processed by some type of AI or machine learning to help feed insights. You might have had it, for example, in marketing, but maybe not in customer service, for example, or maybe not in product, you know, user experience.

So the idea is that you build a data culture. You accelerate it, even if it's in the smallest of instances, right. Like e-commerce, for example. Everybody's digital for the most part. Let's let's start to understand this and look at the other. The other side of it is the digital anthropologist in me. If you're looking at how people are spending money and where and why.

And then if you balance that with, say, qualitative inputs, like just asking questions, you know, this is where empathy really kicks in. So you combine this data, you combine this artificial intelligence to recognize patterns. And we can bring humanity into this with some human centered actions that make a difference or at least that we can start to experiment with. It's using technology, ironically, to be more human, I guess, as a way to put it.

22:33

Kris: Yeah. And so where do you see and understand, this is kind of broad, but where do you know, where are businesses in regards to even being able to do this? I mean, other than the biggest, most forward thinking organizations of the world here and many are still early days on AI and then typically it's revolving around processes, etc. So putting AI into a chair at the strategy table. Where are organizations here? And how can they accelerate to really move forward?

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Brian: That's a good question. I laugh because, you know, I invite anybody who's listening to this. If you are working at this level or if you are considering this sort of idea and a future is to reach out to brian@briansolis.com. The inspiration for the article was the spark or to motivate people to do this or to think about this or to start questioning the capabilities of whether or not they could they could embrace such a thing or or entertain it at the very least.

It's a company that I think about is Electronic Arts (EA) before the pandemic had built a data centered culture around data, I guess is one way to put it. But they put data at the center of the marketing and game development organization. And so I'm going to share this with you, sort of as an abstract examples that maybe we could borrow from it.

There's a video on YouTube if you want to watch, his name is Chris - Chris Buzo. So if you just went to YouTube and looked up Chris and Brian Solis and EA, I'm sure you'd find it. He talks about how they put gamer data and they set the data team in with the marketing team. And then also the product development leads in the same team as well.

So that way they can get real time data based on play, understand and where to make improvements within the game and the game experiences, but then also monitor those trends to get insights for game innovation. And all of that led to better marketing toward gamers because it was much more personalized, much more realistic.

So I think about taking that data centric model and building it inside of an organization like right now, because this is the time to do it if you didn't. There's no point in really looking backwards in terms of data pre March. So what I think we really need to do, what we really need to consider is how can we quickly build out some type of data centered culture.

And then at least we have the inputs, right, cause we're gonna have to get the inputs for data from all across the organization. That's going to be a task in itself. It's not gonna be easy. And I don't know that the CIO has enough time and everybody on their team has enough time to do this with all of the scrambling that they're doing right now.

So it's probably going to have to be a dedicated role to build this out. And this is why we've seen over the years the rise of chief data officers or something similar to that. That because then once you have those inputs, then you can really now start to think about having a black box that can that can be programed to extract or to study these inputs for patterns that could lead to insights that allow us to consider scenario planning, reinforced scenario planning, reveal where we're we're missing elements. But that way, it's purpose is built for the C suite if that made sense.

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Kris: Yeah. And I guess that's also one of the reasons that, you know, centers of excellence, are very often a really good idea. Because rather than having sporadic endeavors around in an organization where you paddle a little bit in a Kickstarter project here and there, for instance, you sort of center your development processes and get the right minds to sort of focus in on that.

But, of course, we have the questions that you're raising yourself here. I mean, everybody's so busy in your phase one survivor mode right now and hopefully also moving beyond that. So being able to dedicate a role here even before was maybe more difficult because of, I don't know, mindset. But now it might even be also because it's really on hands and time. But nevertheless, I mean, how, you know, how small can you start, right? If we were to give like people out, there are a couple of ideas on how to kickstart this if we don't have a huge big machine behind this.

Brian: I like that question because that's what we need right now is little steps. In fact, a friend of mine, Peter Sims, wrote a book many years ago called Little Bets, and it was the idea of how taking small steps can have big payoffs. And that's exactly what we need to do right now. So I'm just going to. I'm going to riff on this because there is no playbook and it's just a recommendation. Feel free to come up with other ideas as well.

I think marketing might be a good place to start. And because since the world is in lockdown or various stages of lockdown or also the psychology of being in lockdown with a virus in the world might still lead people to want to shop digitally more these these days unless you live in Las Vegas, because if you saw that video going around the Internet, that was mind blowing about how everybody in the casino without masks.

But on another note, I guess we're getting back to getting back to the little steps here. I'll share some data points with you. At the end of Q1, say it was, I think, March 15th to March 31st. There was a Sales Force Global Shopping Index. It showed in those two weeks that digital revenue spiked 41% during that time. And so that was an indicator that April 1st and on was going to probably be radically different than February in terms of e-commerce right there.

So it was showing that we were going digital. All of that digital, just the entire journey of searching, shopping, buying service. All of this data around the customer journey right now, even if we've just focused on e-commerce itself, would tell us quite a bit about what they're buying, where they're buying, at least to get us some some quick inputs to then start to study where we can improve in terms of the customer journey or in terms of e-commerce or in terms of marketing.

So I think that's a really good place to start because that data is happening right now. That data is hyper relevant and it's completely different from the data patterns that we saw before. So that's where I would start.

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Kris: That is excellent advice and we will leave it at that for now at least, there's obviously much more to unpack here and it's going to be really, really interesting to follow the future of the AI futurists, the sort of thought around it and what it might what it might end up being here.

I'm certain we will see much more. I'm excited and looking forward to following your thinking around this, and I'll repeat your recommendation here to reach out to anybody who has ideas or experiences or anything around.
It would be fascinating to kickstart even more conversation around this as well. So I thank you so much, Brian, for joining me here on the podcast.

Brian: It's my pleasure. And I hope everyone listening that you get something out of this. I look forward to hearing from you. I'm also at Brian Solis social media platforms if you want to reach out there. And thank you for listening!