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A Conversation with rvatech/: Innovation at the Intersection of Data and AI

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Brian

Welcome to CapTech Trends. I'm Brian Bischoff and I'm hosting today's podcast on data and AI, and I'm really excited about the topics today. It's really hard to have a podcast this day is without talking about AI primarily because it's a rapidly changing environment and it really impacts everything about what we do in the workplace. And we're going to be talking about the convergence of AI and then really a variety of topics around data.

Excited to introduce our podcasts guest for today. All are connected in some capacity to RVATech. Our guest today are Nick Serfass who's the CEO of RVATech, Todd Dube who's a Leader of Analytics and AI and ML for CarMax and is a co-chair of an upcoming summit around data and AI associated with RVATech and then Megan Holt, who's a managing director here at CapTech, but is also an RVATech board member. So happy to have everybody here today to talk about really this convergence space. So welcome.

Megan

Thanks.

Brian

Thank you.

Nick

Thanks, Brian. Thanks Megan.

Todd

Thanks for sponsoring Nick.

Nick

Hey, any chance I get to sit by you Todd is a great day.

Brian

So for those that aren't aware, maybe we'll start out with just a little bit of background on RVATech and really the mission and why really maybe how we are transitioning into this conference talk today.

Nick

Yeah, sure, thanks Brian. RVATech is the Richmond Technology Council for those that don't know. We

are the trade association here locally that intends to or aims to build the best tech ecosystem we can for the city of Richmond and beyond. And we're also doing our best to try to position Richmond as tech's most creative city and hopefully put it on the map nationally as a place that people should know for tech among other things.

Brian

Excellent. Well, thank you. And then, so RVATech is putting on a conference coming up soon around data, and not just data, but data in the convergence of data and AI. So maybe between Todd and Nick, you can explain a little bit about maybe the positioning of why that's important to RVATech and really the overall tech community.

Nick

Yeah, well, I'll start with the bigger picture of, we have five conferences at RVATech that we put on throughout the year in all sorts of verticals and demographics and communities. And our data summit, which originally started as a data science summit, is now going on, I think it's sixth or seventh year, and it's taking a little bit of an evolution this year into the AI space specifically just because tech evolves and we want to keep up with contemporary tech trends and Todd's one of the co-chairs and the leaders in this effort to put on the conference and the programming, and I'll let Todd tell you a little bit more about it.

Todd

Yeah, cool. Awesome, yeah, we decided to pick up AI because everything had AI in it, so we thought it made sense.

Brian

That makes perfect sense.

Todd

Now we got our community members together, which are just leaders from our community here in Richmond. It's one of the first things we wanted to address, "Hey, do we want to add AI onto it? Do we want to offer some of those things in there?"

Brian

It should really be a question of where can we add it into it? Add AI to everything, how do we add it in

here? Right?

Todd

Yeah. And I think the resemblance of that is just we had over 120 call for papers for 22 spots that we had on our agenda for the day, so we had to sort through all those different presentations that people offered to us. So I think we hit the nail on the head, everyone's very interested and we've got some really cool topics on that stuff. I just like the way it's evolved. I started attending the conference I think one year and I said, "Hey, how can I get involved and help?" And I think I helped the next few on the committees until now. I just thought it was a cool thing, cool thing in Richmond. I love Richmond, I love just the tech space in here and what we do in Richmond, and I just think it's a great effort with these guys run for the different communities, so I think it makes a lot of sense.

Brian

Yeah. How did you converge on the topics you wanted to cover and really why do you think those are important now?

Todd

Yeah, I think there's a great recipe we follow. I think it started I think probably with Laurie and Brian evolve. We just get our committee members together, find volunteers or volun-tell them, "Hey, you're going to help us." So there are people from other companies here in Richmond, consulting companies or any of the sponsors for RVATech and we get on there and say, "Hey, it's data and AU. What do we want to hear? What do we want to talk about?" We look at what we had last year, get that feedback and we picked, I can't remember... I think, this is what Aaron's good at, it's six tracks in that space. And then we kind of wrote a quick summary of that to put on our call for papers. And it was really through community, we had some really smart people and passionate people either from a consulting agency or companies here in Richmond that just helped us nail that down. It was a lot of stuff.

We had people submitting papers that were from England, Spain, I think we had from Canada and I think France, and I think with that, and then we had to search for keynotes to find that stuff. We try to keep more people in here, our good recipe is don't try and find repeats. We've got one or two repeats in there, that'll be the trivia question you already know the answer to that, one of our trivia questions for the conference. But it's been great. And then how can we raise the bar on our keynotes? I remember the first, second or third year I attended, the keynotes were awesome. They've been great every year,

but I was like, "What can we do more better this year?" So the keynotes were also important, that was kind of like the key to us getting the rest of those presentations all laid out.

Brian

Now, Megan, as a board member, how do you see shaping some of the messaging that goes into these conferences?

Megan

Well, we hear about after each conference, Nick does a really nice job of debriefing us on what goes well and what could be improved upon. And so it's a nice dialogue at the board level to really talk through how we can contribute to the conferences, ideas that we can suggest. One thing that RVATech did this year, in January I think it was, all of the committee heads got together because each conference, while it's unique, they saw an opportunity for some synergies and for some efficiencies of how each one pulls all of the things together. And I attended, I lead up the chair of the membership committee, so we participated trying to understand how we, from a member community perspective, could also lend a hand across each of the programs and conferences that we do. So a lot of streamlining has been happening over the last year or so that is really nice to see because I think it gives us the ability to continue expanding the programming as it makes sense.

Nick

Hey, Brian and Megan, that programming, like Todd mentioned, has really expanded this year, and I just wanted to highlight the tracks that Todd was talking about. It's building and deploying ML models, modern data engineering, AI driven workplaces, building careers, data and AI for social impact and a leadership track. So really, it's quite a robust set of programming that Todd and Aaron have put together.

Todd

Yeah, Nick's probably going to mark me down for not knowing the names of the tracks, but he brought them up, that's what teamwork's all about. One thing I've completely forgot was we're trying to also get education back involved again, and I don't know if you saw the emails today, we've got a pretty significant amount of students that are showing up.

Nick

Yeah, we have over 50 students already registered.

Todd

Yeah, that's awesome.

Nick

And we're still almost a month out here.

Megan

That's great.

Nick

So yeah, more of a student presence at this conference than I think maybe we've ever had before at any of our events.

Todd

Yeah, because I think last year I know we reached out to the core schools, VCUU, RUVA and everyone wants to get involved but I think there's some timing with UVA, but this year I saw it was 27 from I think UofR, I'm like, that's awesome that we got students coming because building careers and just them learning how to network, see vendors in our vendor hall and our sponsors, I think that's huge.

Brian

We did a podcast recently where we actually had one of the professors from VCU on talking through how they're enabling students and how they're really teaching in this land of AI and this world of AI now, it's really amazing how adaptive they have to be and really just the learning styles as well as just the really approach to solving problems.

Nick

Yeah, I was just on a panel with VCU recently, we were talking about how students could better learn AI and leverage it, and one of the things that we talked about was just getting students to use AI on all of their different projects in all of their different classes, not just focusing on the AI class or the engineering class, but take your English class, take your sociology class and apply it in some way. That way when you get out of school, you have a portfolio of applied AI initiatives that you've done.

Todd

It's a tool, just use it as a tool.

Nick

It's a tool for everything, not just that.

Todd

It's a capability, figure out how to use it to solve problems, have it help you solve your problems.

Megan

I would love to hear a little bit more about the leadership track that is one of the six. Can you or Nick share a little bit more about that one?

Todd

It is just provide just good key leadership, people with really higher level thought leadership in the AI or data space so that we can get people to understand what leaders are thinking about and talking about. And I think in that one too, I think we have a panel in that one too, don't we, Nick?

Nick

Yeah. Well, there's a few elements. There's data storytelling, let AI make it easy, at scale data resiliency for risk, the state of AI adoption. So there's a handful of sessions there.

Todd

And I think that one's a panel so we've got someone from CarMax and two consultants out there I'll be facilitating.

Megan

I think you have a CapTecher checker on that panel.

Nick

Steve McLaughlin, Jason Snook.

Megan

Yes, Dr. Snook.

Todd

Oh, Dr. Snook. Yeah, I've got to find good inside questions to ask for those people.

Brian

I'm sure we can find something.

Megan

Yes.

Brian

Now, but you've talked about the tracks, at a high level, the various tracks, and maybe this could be a question that's potentially even broader than just the conference. Nick, I've listened to a couple of your podcasts recently where you talk about AI and really the enablement, the workforce enablement, a lot of the fear that people have and uncertainty and doubt in some of these spaces. But if you kind of put some of that stuff to the side, what are each of you, all three of you, most excited about in this space, whether it be these topics of conferences that'll be at the conference or just in the broader space? What's in the potential with AI and data? What are you most excited about?

Nick

I'm excited about the workforce potential, and I mean the front end rather than the backend. And what I mean by that is at this point, a lot of the AI work has been done on the backend with developing it, developing the technology so that it exists, but I think now we're at the application phase where we're going to see businesses across all verticals need AI application engineers to use it. How are you using it for customer service? How are you using it to project manage? How are you using it to write copy, whether it's marketing, project management, management, accounting, all those types of things. I'm just encouraged by the amount of jobs they're going to be created by the need to apply it to day-to-day tasks.

Todd

Yeah, I think that's critical. You and I were kind of talking before, we were talking about it's like what are the real use cases that really can affect a business? And that's what you have to really look at on it, I think. Everyone's out there trying to sell you on something, but do you have real use cases that can either save time on the phone, save time for your customer online? To your point, it's like, "Okay, now how do I apply this?" And I think that's where the jobs are going to come, but I think the workforce has to be a lot smarter in how they use it. You just can't, "It's just going to write my code or write my speech

or do my PowerPoints," I'm going to give it the ideas but you have to think, I think, more intelligently, "Okay, what am I asking it? Why am I asking? Okay, what did it give me? Is it right?" And really think about it. I think you have to be a lot smarter in how you use it.

Megan

Well, I do like the positive outlook though, Nick, that I think when you go out into society and bring up AI, everybody worries about jobs being taken away because of AI. So I like that perspective of actually it's going to expand quite a bit of job opportunities in the workforce.

Nick

Yeah, I think we've all seen this just in our own careers, that there are a lot of jobs that exist today that didn't exist when we were even in college. We're doing things that weren't around then, and that's going to be the same way in 10 or 15 years with this stuff, I think.

Brian

It's interesting, I talked to a lot of our data consultants, our data engineers and the industry has been doing AI work in its current generational form for 10 years or so, right? I mean, a lot of model generation type stuff in machine learning analytics, it's been around for quite a while and then it obviously changed in the last 18 months significantly around some of these large language models and more the generative side of things. And I think that's put a lot of emphasis and attention back on data. And so it seems like an obvious connection to have your conference, inject AI into your data conference and kind of transform your data conference. But I'm curious your perspectives on maybe the additional attention we're now getting to some of the core disciplinary aspects of just data organizations and how AI is now bringing that back kind of front and center.

Todd

Yeah, I think in my role it's a huge focus ensuring you have the right data, you're trying to research the right thing and just enabling our data scientists or people who are exploring it, just giving them the data so they can just figure out what they want to do or come up with some ideas and then also prove those ideas out. I think we always talk with data prep and all that kind of fun stuff, everyone talks the data engineering aspect, that will always exist and stuff like that. I'm very interested to kind of see how tools can help data prep and making data available can be made easier with AI and available in that stuff.

But I think it's just going to be super interesting I think in the next two or three years. I think to your point is enablement happens really what I'm going to call really cool capabilities come out. Not just everyone, "Hey, I've got an LLM, you need to use it. It's the best, it's better than this one." And I think that's where I'm really going to get excited. Kind of like blockchain, blockchain kind of came out and then kind of in my words, fell, disappeared.

Nick

Yeah. It didn't seem like there was a practicability to it or democratization to it.

Todd

Practicability.

Nick

That's probably not even a word, but I tend to make words. But I think to Brian's point, there are a lot of companies and industries out there that have been processing data and using data and have kind of been building and manipulating AI for years and years. And they'll tell you that, they're like, "This is nothing new. We've been doing this for years." It's the application to the front-end user that everybody in any demographic now is all of a sudden sees a practical application to it, not just somebody on a consultant level driving hard into the data or somebody processing data as a science, it's actual practical usage among all demographics, and I think that's the difference.

Brian

What are some of those practical applications that maybe you could think of? I could throw out a couple.

Nick

You want me to go first? No, you go first, Todd.

Todd

Well, you and I kind of talked about it, I'll elaborate, it's just customer service. What can you do better either with your associates or your customers just to get them to the point they want to get, whether that's a transaction or just an answer or help them with their account or anything like that? Can I just get to something a little bit quicker so I know what I can do? I bank online, I bank on my phone, I trust technology. You can hit me later or whatever you want, but my bank just rolled out new changes in their

mobile app and it has all my tasks that I work on, they just kind of float to the top so I don't have to go, "Okay, I want this account, that account do this." It tells me, "Oh, you did this last week. You want to do this again?" Sure. "Oh, you paid this." I like that because it just makes my life easier while I'm on a conference call and I can pay my bill. I don't have to go, "Okay, bills, bills, click here, click here, oh, this bill." And it's learning.

Nick

So it's getting better every day.

Todd

And I love it.

Megan

It's creating that frictionless experience.

Todd

Yeah, I think that's the practical application.

Nick

That's a great term, Megan. I think, again, back to the democratization, it's frictionless now, it's more accessible. But to your point, Brian, about what are the practical applications, for me, the most intriguing lately is this psychological and behavioral forecasting that it can do. There's a tool in particular called Crystal Knows, you can actually attach it to your LinkedIn and to your word and email and you can tell it who you are trying to target. So if I'm trying to target a sale to Brian Bischoff, it'll actually read your LinkedIn profile, psychologically analyze you, and then tell me the words and phrases that would be most impactful to you and to get my point across to you mostly for sales and persuasive purposes, but we're all trying to persuade people in one way or another to do something or not do something and I think having a tech tool now that can help us with that, that can tell me more about how to convince Todd Dube to put the right programming in place, it's going to be great. And it's compelling, maybe a little freaky, but I think it's really intriguing and interesting.

Todd

That frightens me because now that people are trying to ask me for an opportunity, love them all, love you all, they're going to come back with words that are going to make me want to respond though in a

more opportunistic way versus, "Hey, I'm giving my canned answers." That's kind of frightening, kind of cool, but kind of frightening. Because I think the CRM tool, like the Salesforce CRM tool of the day, like, "Hey, I had an email exchange with you, and also I'm getting your email marketing." I don't like those, but if you can get a lot smarter and target me, I'm all about that.

Nick

Look on the bright side, Todd, people are going to talk to you in a way that you want to be talked to, so it's going to be a more enjoyable communication experience for you.

Todd

You can rub my shoulders.

Nick

You might spend more money.

Brian

And it's funny how quickly we've evolved from the productivity conversations, which everybody's trying to figure out how do we use AI to be more productive, which there are a number of examples around that, and then these customer service examples of how do we just make more meaningful interactions with individuals, our customers, our citizens, whoever might be on the other end of that communication. And then to those personalized experiences really across the board, all these things are tying together, and I'm expecting to see a lot of those stories probably come through in this conference in a few weeks, but I think that's something that is interesting to me as far as those three kind of categories of use cases.

Nick

Yeah, it's interesting that some of us fear giving our data out or fear that our privacy is being invaded, but we appreciate the convenience and the experience of having a customized engagement experience provided to us. We want our phones to be able to just pop up exactly what we want, we want things that we want to buy presented to us. So yeah, I think you got to take the good with the bad.

Todd

Yeah, yeah. The privacy is always an interesting thing, I always debate with that because I'm a privacy person, I believe in protecting your data and stuff like that, but I like sharing some of my data if it can

make my experience better, I'm all about it.

Nick

There's another angle to all this, and it's the creative aspect of it as well. It's getting beyond writer's block. So if you're in the creative industry, whether you are an artist, a graphic designer or a writer, it can get you beyond the blank page, which I think is what stumps a lot of us on our day-to-day work sometimes. We all have creative elements that we need to produce, and by getting beyond that blank page, it helps give you something to start with, to react to, a new thought about what it could look like.

Brian

So tying back to the conference that you have coming up, and one of the tracks that you mentioned was around I think career growth, and so I'm not going to quiz you on specifically the aspects of the track, don't worry, Nick's got it ready. But I'm curious, as a young professional in this area, in the context of everything we talked about so far, why would a young professional be interested in getting involved with somebody like an RVATech at one angle, but then also what can they benefit from participating in these sorts of events and summits like RVATech is putting on for this month?

Todd

I think you can add to this Nick after me is I think just knowing how to network, knowing how to find people and seeing real world things happening versus what I see on YouTube or what my professor may be teaching me or what I'm seeing in the reels that are out there on TikTok or something like that. I think it's just you're seeing real world things, you'll be able to talk to real people, real companies. I talked about my use case and I got two students that come up and want to talk to us, "Oh God, you guys are really doing this? I want to get involved in something like this." Where they can see some of these cool careers and companies that are doing real relevant things. And I think that's the big push with this.

Nick

Yeah, I think if you're in the younger stages of your career or if you're a student, you have a curiosity that needs to be satiated, you don't know what you don't know. So getting involved in an organization like RVATech with five different conferences and sampling those types of things gives you exposure and allows you to kind of dive your curiosity into all the different topics that tech offers and who knows what you might like and what you might not like, and it might help direct your career path. Maybe you think it's AI and data and then you attend a cyber conference and you're like, "Oh, these are my people," and

you just didn't know.

Megan

Yeah. I do think it gives a lot of good exposure that they wouldn't otherwise have with what they have in the classroom or what they just, like you said, through their TikTok reels, it's sort of seeing these practical applications of things and saying, "Oh, okay, that actually makes sense from a career perspective, and it's not this narrow thing that I read in a textbook," type of thing.

Brian

One of the things that we see with all of our college hires especially is that just the desire to branch out and try to learn all these different areas and be exposed to as many of these sorts of functional areas as possible and early on in their career, I think it's a great opportunity for people. So immersing themselves in these sorts of conferences, finding out these different tracks, just the different possibilities of really what can be done in the space is a great way for early career folks to really start to branch out. I guess kind of wrapping up this conversation a little bit, but what's the one thing people should be considering when they go to something like this? If I'm walking in, what should my frame of mind be when I'm walking into this conference and trying to explore?

Todd

I got an answer.

Nick

Good because I don't.

Todd

Mine is get involved. And I think if anyone says, "Oh, hey, what you guys talking about?" We'd love to get you involved. Not that I'm looking for people for not so positive feedback, but these things only happen when people get involved and want to make a difference or make a change or make it better.

Megan

Yeah, I was going to say, one of the things Mary and I talked about and I think we were trying to do is set up basically a member table at the conferences just so people can learn more about RVATech, the organization and what all it does and how broad it is and how it enhances the Richmond technology community. So that's part of our goals is to sort of educate the broader Richmond community from a

technology perspective about RVATech. It's a pretty big organization already, but obviously you get people attending these conferences that are going because they hear about the data, they aren't necessarily thinking about the organization behind it that is making it all happen. And if they are, I know when I first went to a couple of RVATech conferences, I was like, "This is cool, but I wonder who the people are behind this. How do I get involved with it?" And so I kind of-

Todd

That's me.

Megan

Went via CapTech to understand it. But yeah, I mean, I didn't know. I didn't know who to talk to. I was just kind of as a participant, so we're hoping to change that.

Todd

Table's a great idea.

Nick

Yeah, I always-

Todd

Did you guys pay for sponsorship for that?

Nick

Yeah, we're sponsoring our own conference, yeah, you got to support your own backyard. I always tell people when you come to conferences, just be prepared to say hi and say yes. Whoever it is, just introduce yourself. If it's somebody you're sitting next to or eating lunch with or at a booth, don't be afraid to walk up and say hi.

Todd

But I think that's awesome to say get involved, come in and network. To me, I think that's what I'm saying, get involved. Maybe that's what it is, I don't know. Just network with people.

Megan

Yeah, and it's such a good networking opportunity. I mean, it's huge. Richmond's kind of like that Goldilocks size of a city. It's not too big, it's not too small. And so things like this just get enough

connections that your network can expand tremendously in a very short amount of time.

Nick

If you're listening to this and you're not from Richmond, this is a great event and reason to come to town and check it out, you're going to get a great event, you're going to get a chance to see a Goldilocks city here and a city that is tech's most creative city.

Brian

So maybe we'll close on that then as a great opportunity. So the conference, we've talked a lot about it, is March 28th, end of the month, get your tickets now, get them early. It sounds like the six tracks will be certainly engaging enough no matter what your background is and your perspective is whether you have zero exposure or a lot of exposure to AI or zero exposure, a lot of exposure to data, they'll probably be an opportunity for you to do that. All right, well, I want to thank Nick and Todd and Megan for joining us today. And again, we're excited about really just all the evolutions that are happening in this data space and looking forward to hearing much more from this group and beyond.

Todd

Thanks for having us.

Brian

Yeah, appreciate it.

Nick

Thanks so much.