

The World According to The Woz: Steve Wozniak at FOSE on Fostering Creativity and Innovation

Part 1 – Background and the Basics

On July 19, 2011, I had the pleasure of attending a keynote session at The Federal Office Systems Expo, better known as FOSE. Apple co-founder, entrepreneur and tech visionary Steve “The Woz” Wozniak, spoke on “Fostering Creativity and Innovation in Any Environment.” The keynote was heavily attended -- in part due to great interest in the topic, and in part due to the draw of a marquee-name speaker... and The Woz did not disappoint. His hour-long talk was a combination of personal anecdotes from his own life, lessons learned throughout his storied career and projections as to the future of technology in the years to come.



The fact is, there is really no such thing as a key or magic spell that can make a person creative. Like much else, being creative is a skill. Some people come by it naturally, others have to work at it. Still others never quite grasp it, but it is something that you have to embrace, practice and use regularly to gain the most benefits. Thinking outside the box can be a real challenge, particularly in an office or government setting, but it pays rewards in the form of market innovation, cost savings in the long run and even green benefits in some cases.

One point that Wozniak stressed again and again in his speech was that people learn more doing things for themselves and for personal or selfish reasons than they ever do for outside reasons. As a kid, he and his friends would do small chores and tasks for the local electronics shop in exchange for spare lengths of wire, capacitors, resistors and many other bits and bobs from the supply bins. They learned a lot, from the chores and from their own experimentation, ending up with a neighborhood intercom system between houses that their parents knew nothing about!

That’s self-motivation, and that was a recurring theme in his career and in his talk. His own hobbies, interests and pastimes led to most of his first commercial successes -- the first scientific calculator that he designed at HP for kicks on his break, his own version of a Pong game that played on a TV (which evolved into Breakout), California’s first Dial-a-Joke service back when answering machines were new technology and very expensive to operate, even the first PCs he designed -- all sprang from his own geeky desires and passions. They turned into commercial successes, yet he didn’t design a single one saying, “I’m going to invent this product and become rich and successful.” In fact, the very first computer he designed was a Build-Your-Own-PC kit that included plans and schematics... and he GAVE it AWAY.

No, Steve Wozniak was creative and innovative for personal reasons, not financial or business reasons. One of the best quotes of the afternoon was on this very topic: “Intrinsic rewards are a lot more powerful than all the extrinsic rewards the world can see.” He built things that he had a passion for, that he thought were neat or that he simply wanted to have and couldn’t afford to buy, which resulted in creative solutions and innovative products. In 1975, some of the first microprocessors hit the market... and were little more than the DIY computers he and his buddies build for themselves in high school because they desperately wanted their own computers to tinker with. Selfish rewards can be great motivators to innovation.

Another example Woz gave involved the very first year the “big three” personal computer manufacturers -- Apple, Commodore and Radio Shack -- were scheduled to exhibit at CES for the first time. Steve had never been to Las Vegas, but REALLY wanted to go. Unfortunately, like many trade shows, the engineers were not at the top of the “to go” list, the sales people were. Steve used the Las Vegas show as a personal motivator and made a deal with the marketing guys. If he could come up with a truly groundbreaking product prototype, he could go with them to debut it at CES. With only two weeks left before the show, he went to work and designed a new innovation on the floppy disk, earning him his first trip to Sin City -- and one of his four sole inventor patents.

Another theme of Wozniak's speech, which goes hand-in-hand with personal motivation and intrinsic reward, is the importance of education for both creativity and success. He credits his own teachers a great deal for his success and has sought throughout his career to pay it forward to others, funding scholarship awards for young technologists and sponsoring mentoring programs. He even devoted a few years of his life, post-Apple, to teaching 5th grade in a school near his home -- a task he considers a labor of love and does not generally publicize.

For those of us who grew up with Apple II computers in school and still live an iLife, Steve Wozniak is one of those epic figures in American business and technology. Yet the guy who spoke to us at FOSE was witty and passionate about his true love -- technology. He was a typical geek in that he came to life discussing his various experiments and projects he undertook "just for fun" but was able to laugh at himself and his celebrity, particularly when asked about appearing on "Dancing with the Stars." I am very glad I caught his address and highly recommend to others in any technology field -- if you have the chance to see The Woz, take it! It'll be a worthwhile experience. I guarantee it.

Wozniak concluded his keynote at FOSE with a number of predictions and trends to watch. Tune in to this space next time for part two of this review to hear his thoughts and find out more about the world according to The Woz.

To view photos and video highlights from the 2011 FOSE show, including Steve Wozniak's entire keynote address, visit their site at <http://fose.com/Events/FOSE-2011/Home.aspx>; and to attend in person, FOSE 2012 is scheduled for April 3-5, 2012, again at the Washington Convention Center in Washington, DC.

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