
Coffee and Conversations - featuring Bob Royce

For the last twenty years, Bank of Ann Arbor's Technology Industry Group has watched the local tech scene grow and change. The group, led by Michael Cole, has created relationships with the innovative and creative people who have helped to shape the region into a nationally recognized tech-hub.

Coffee and Conversations is a series of candid conversations with some of the influential tech leaders of Southeast Michigan. Each edition features Michael and a guest, talking about all things tech - innovation, changes, successes and failures, tools of the trade and much more.

This month, Michael is joined by Bob Royce, Founder and CEO of The Understanding Group, a consulting firm specializing in information architecture.

Michael Cole: Thank you so much for sitting down with me today, Bob! So, your company is called The Understanding Group, which is a consulting firm specializing in information architecture. What does that mean, what is your team doing for its client base?

Bob Royce: Well, we help companies with their digital places, their websites, software apps, and digital transformation initiatives. People come to us with complex situations. Maybe they've got multiple properties, multiple brands, multiple systems, and multiple people involved in their projects that perhaps they're trying to bring together. We help people structure and organize those complex places so that they are clear and easy for people to use; people can get their work done and actually enjoy engaging with their digital places.

For example, about ten years ago, the city of Ann Arbor website used to have what we would call 'wall to wall carpeting' of links, basically just links covering the entire page. We came in and reorganized the homepage.

We took all the information pertaining to the city of Ann Arbor - voting, operating a business, living in Ann Arbor - and created a navigational system within the site that allowed users to find that information easily. Our work with the city led us to work with U-M. There used to be thirty different websites that U-M employees had to navigate to access their benefits or other necessary information. We worked with them to bring all those thirty sites together into one place that U-M employees can access for anything HR related.

MC: Those sound like some pretty major projects - how many internal employees does TUG have? Do you also work with any contractors?

BR: We have about a dozen internal employees, but when we add in our extended team, we probably reach fifteen.

MC: A topic I've touched on with all my guests' surrounding employees, is how your workforce was affected when COVID hit and shifted life virtually. How did TUG adjust to the virtual world we found ourselves living?

BR: Even though I've talked mostly about local clients, we do have clients all over the country. We've also done some international work, so we've always utilized virtual options from our office, meetings, doing presentations and at key moments. And we've always had multiple offices. So, we learned, even before the pandemic, how to use Zoom and other online meeting platforms. And it's evolved. Zoom has clearly kind of become the dominant, but we've also used Google Meet to work with each other and collaborate and do some meetings with clients. Before the pandemic, when travel budgets would get tight, we would do remote meetings. We learned to do everything we needed to do remotely or through shared whiteboard kinds of things. Now there are more and more tools people can use to collaborate.

MC: With a small team, working remote, what is your teams work process? How are you able to take such complex issues and tackle them with a clear end goal?

BR: Our work process follows the pattern: observe, model, align. To start, we want to get a broad sense of our clients' vision and process. We ask our clients, "What are the systems in play? What are the people in play? All these digital places our clients create are in the service of humans and relationships and in engagement, for the most part. Sometimes, simply clarifying the target demographic helps. Simply laying out and summarizing their services helps. Often, the value TUG brings to these companies lies in viewing their processes with fresh eyes. After we discuss their vision, we observe how closely their existing process aligns with what they are trying to accomplish, and then we take to the whiteboard to streamline.

When creating their model, we simplify where we can, for greater clarity and efficiency in their digital places. This work is extremely collaborative. We present what we observe, and our clients give us their feedback. You get clarity in alignment by actually putting a stake in the ground and expressing something - the first models we create are very simple and are intended to be played with and changed and to morph. From there we'll decide what needs a deeper analysis. For example, if our clients identify their important customers, we'll research them and come up with a broad depiction of what we think they are like and what they want to do and how they gain. We make models accordingly and present them to our clients to check if they align with what our clients want to accomplish for their top customers.

Essentially, we collaborate with our clients to identify the core problems of their digital space, what success looks like for them, and what objectives we want to achieve.

MC: I remember coming into your office and seeing that you have profiles of customers. What do you do with those?

BR: There are a lot of different kinds of user models. "Personas" are a very common one that kind of emerged in the early 2000s. Personas are basically fictional people that are intended to represent the characteristics of your ideal customer or different customer types. They focus on the likes and dislikes of this person. It gives the reminder that we're not serving ourselves; we're serving, say, a customer named Sarah, so we create a persona for her. The models we create at The Understanding Group tend to focus on what people, like Sarah, need to do. What tasks do people need to do and how can we organize those tasks for them to easily access? People may visit a website to get work done. They may visit to get help. They may visit the website to engage with other people. Each time they perform those different tasks, they have different needs. Instead of personas, we create what we call "archetypes" based on these needs. So, say, even though Sarah may have a unique persona of her likes and dislikes, she and George can all have the same archetype if they have similar needs. Our job is to come up with a structure for our clients' digital space that can meet all the needs of an identified archetype.

MC: Your business model and approach is so deliberate. What were you doing before you founded TUG in 2011?

BR: Well, when you and I met in 2001, it would've been just after the whole dotcom thing, and I would've been VP of Business Development for DNA Software. From there I started RFD Insight, which was basically a management consulting firm where we would provide fractional executive expertise to companies with the purpose of helping them grow. There were three partners, and between us, we had experience in finance, business development, sales and marketing, and operational kinds of things. For instance, Dexter Research Center is a manufacturer of infrared sensors, and we came in and basically became part of their management team on a part-time basis. We did that for seven years. During that time, I knew you, and Bank of Ann Arbor was our bank then. We didn't have many expenses or much need for capital, but some of our clients did, so we worked together with some of the customers that we had. You came in and provided some of the initial banking for them. So, we've both been working with Bank of Ann Arbor for a long time.

MC: You and I have been working together for quite some time, and it's always seemed to me that you are in a growth industry. Do you see the need for your services increasing as the digital age continues to march forward and evolve?

BR: When we started, the digital age was still young. The Internet just keeps expanding, and that technological innovation has really driven our success. When the Internet was just up-and-coming, the ability to connect to anyone - anywhere, anytime - was this phenomenal thing. The engineering behind it is phenomenal. Now that the technical framework is pretty well-established, we need to focus on the human aspect of this communication power - how do we talk to each other, how do we decide to name things together so we can access and navigate these information channels effectively? People are constantly doing this, so I think The Understanding Group has a great opportunity for growth.

The Understanding Group emerged at the perfect time in not just the world but in Ann Arbor. U-M and Ann Arbor hold a rich history of information architecture that have stood the test of time, and organizations like this one have helped change the Internet and way of the world.