

20 Questions with 2010 CEEdMA Innovation Award Winner Mark Powell

On November 16th, at the CEEdMA 2010 Fall Conference networking dinner, Mark Powell of Symantec was recognized as the winner of CEEdMA's very first Innovation Award, part of a new program to recognize excellence among CEEdMA members. Since Mark was unable to attend the conference and speak about his accomplishment, we caught up with Mark to learn more about his work, his award win, and what it means to him.



Let's start with an easy question. How long have you been a member of CEEdMA?

About three years.

How did you find out about CEEdMA?

I had known about CEEdMA for a long time of course, but at Symantec they try to be very engaged in professional organizations. Which was my impetus for finally becoming involved.

Has being a part of CEEdMA made a difference in your job?

Absolutely. The lists alone have provided me with better unfiltered information than any other channel I have ever been hooked into. Real-world, anecdotal feedback from peers.

You're a Senior Manager of Education Production Services at Symantec. That's a nice title – what exactly do you do at work?

My standard pitch is that on one side you have content development in all its various forms, and on the other you have delivery, be it instructor-led, virtual, asynchronous e-learning, social, or any combination thereof. Production Services owns the pipeline between those two entities. We manage fulfillment vendors for physical deliverables, we publish to LMSs, manage content repositories, provide editorial and QA services, and offer various other services that help bridge the gap between development and delivery.

What does an Innovation Award winner do with his free time?

Free time? I have young kids, so whatever free time I manage to get goes directly to their account!

For those people who weren't able to attend the Fall conference, can you give a brief description of the project that won you CEEdMA's 2010 Innovation Award?

Well, the problem I was trying to solve was how to put order to the digital information that was laying siege to our organization. Course descriptions, class sites, instructor assignments, download locations,

developer identity, SKUs, BOMs, and a myriad of other data points, which reside in everything from LMSs and Oracle databases to emails and Excel spreadsheets on SharePoint. As with all large organizations, data generally does exist somewhere, but knowing its location and how one source relates to another can be a very difficult task. The project I undertook became the Course Dashboard tool, an application that correlates all this disparate data and displays it in an interface that allows for very fast searching and reporting.

Were you sure you could succeed when you started the project?

I have background in both instructional design and software development, so I was confident I had the technical ability. But was I sure I could succeed? No. There were too many things outside of my control to know that it would succeed as it did (time demands being one of biggest x-factors). So my initial goal was to create a tool for use by my team only, as an aid to us being able to keep track of our own throughput. However as it matured, I distributed to peer groups and then finally decided to make it “ready for prime time,” putting in all the essential elements for it to be a proper software application usable by anyone on the Symantec enterprise.

What difference did the project make for your company?

It has gotten a lot of very positive feedback from all disciplines. Not only from development and delivery that bookend my team, but from everyone. Business development managers, sales, financial reporting, and just about every organization within the company that consumes learning and that needed an easy way to get to it. We have passed 1,500 Symantec internal users, which is really the best indicator of adoption.

What do you think CEEdMA members outside of Symantec can learn from your project?

Technical folks might be interested in some arcane aspects like how I approached the data mining or how I wrote the filtering algorithms, which I believe are fairly unique within the industry. However, in general what the project re-affirmed to me was this: break large challenges into smaller ones, and tackle those one at a time. Sounds trite, I know, but if there is any secret sauce to the Dashboard it is that. Knowing how to go about the project before you begin. Planning.

Is your company supportive of innovation?

Yes, definitely. I would not have been able to do this work without the full support of my direct manager. She understood its significance and helped champion the effort from the beginning. But truth is that she would not have been able to support me in innovating unless she herself had similar support from her own management. It has to be in the culture.

Yours was a fairly technical innovation – do you think a person has to be technically savvy in order to innovate?

Innovation simply means solving a problem in a new way, which is entirely possible by anyone in any specialization. It is as much an attitude as it is acumen.

In your award application, you mentioned one universal law – “keep it simple.” Why do you think that’s so important?

Part of it is simplicity from the point of view of engineering: the more potential points of failure there are, the more likely there will be failure. Reduce work flows down to basic steps, eliminate unnecessary dependencies, and question conventional wisdom that says because something has always been done in a certain way that it must continue to be done that way. Simplicity in engineering is essentially looking at a thing in a factory metaphor and evaluating how that factory can run better.

The other part is simplicity from the point of view of psychology of the user. Nobody is going to be as enamored of your idea as you yourself might be, nor will they be as forgiving. You have to make it easy for them and present the idea so that it is clear why it will benefit them. Would you be any different if presented with someone else’s idea? How often do you get an email announcing the latest improvement to a process or tool? There is a lot of competition for people’s attention. Keeping it simple means that you can convince others of the merit of your idea, without it getting lost in background noise.

What made you decide to compete for CEEdMA’s 2010 Innovation Award?

I have done many tools at Symantec and elsewhere, most of which are more narrowly focused than the Dashboard. However, the Dashboard is probably one of my best works, not only from the point of view of how it tackles the problem from an architectural perspective, but in the degree of “pain relief” it has afforded the Symantec community. I had never submitted anything for competition before, but I felt that this tool was particularly worthy of consideration.

There were a lot of good entries in the competition - what do you think set your entry apart from all of the rest?

I would like to think that part of it is that just about everyone can relate to the problem it tries to solve. Having to find data in a corporate environment, where some of the data is either technically untappable, or just plain impossible to find in the first place. We have all been through it. So the idea that a wide array of data can be viewed and reported in a DIY fashion is compelling.

Do you think you’ll compete for other CEEdMA awards, like the upcoming Impact award?

It would be an honor to compete for other awards, though I have no current plans.

You were travelling this fall so you weren’t able to attend the Fall conference to receive your award in person. Do you normally attend the CEEdMA conferences?

Each conference has seemed to coincide with some other previously scheduled event, and I have not yet been able to attend. This Fall I was in India on a long overdue trip to visit part of my team here, but I hope to be able to plan enough in advance to join the next time around!

Do you participate in other CEEdMA events, like Special Interest Groups or Ask the Members?

Yes, I am very active in Ask the Members, and have several ad hoc collaborations that sprang from them.

To succeed with innovation, you recommended in your award application that people “maintain a balance between patience and tenacity.” How do you balance those two?

On that I think I need to be listening for answers as much as I would presume to be giving them...the fact that I know that you need to, doesn't mean that I know how to! It is like that old song about knowing when to hold them and when to fold them. You want to have the tenacity to see problems through, but you want the wisdom to know when to surrender or at least to re-set your goals.

Have you found a special place for your award trophy?

I am going to pick it up when I get back from India. After showing it off to family it will occupy a very prominent spot at home.

Do you have any advice for future Innovation Award competitors?

Yes. Find the answer to the previous question about balance. If you have the ability to identify problems in your work flow, you probably have it in you to solve those problems. Be tenacious and don't give up, but don't try to boil the ocean either.