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Pioneer Awards Celebrate 10th Year of Engineering Innovation

CEC Posting Date: 2009-Nov-12

Todd Foggoa, the engineer who single-handedly won the Small-Team Productivity Innovation award for his Scrubber tool, poses with John Chambers and SVPs Pankaj Patel (far left), Kathy Hill (second from left), and Joel Bion (far right).

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This year marked the big 1-0 for the prestigious Pioneer Awards at Cisco. Recent ceremonies in San Jose, Boxborough, and Bangalore gave approximately 75 engineers a chance to shine as they received prized telescopes in reward for the engineering breakthroughs that they accomplished during this 10th anniversary year.

When you consider that these award winners represent only about 0.4 percent of the entire engineering workforce at Cisco, you can rightly call them this year's crème de la crème among engineers.

As the highest awards for engineering at Cisco, the Pioneer Awards, which were designed to spur feats of engineering innovation, draw intense competition among engineering teams at the company. This year was no different, with 56 nominations for just four awards: Core Technology, Large-Team Productivity Innovation, Small-Team Productivity Innovation, and Product Innovation.

"A common theme to all the awards is 'pioneer,'" said Joel Bion, SVP for Advanced Research and Development and host for the San Jose ceremony on October 29 along with John Chambers. "That word 'pioneer' is not just meant to indicate that something new was done. The teams that have won this award have exhibited risk taking. They've shown that they have an idea and can drive it through when there are doubters saying 'this is a good idea but may not be possible.'

"These are people who broke through all that and showed the best example of Cisco collaboration and teamwork to achieve an outstanding result," Bion added.

Core Technology Award

Bion introduced the Core Technology award as one that rewards "unique, deep, industry-impacting technical innovation." This year's Core Technology award went

to members of the Video Content Platforms BU (VCPBU) for creation of the Cisco Video Quality Experience (VQE).

Cisco VQE is a set of technologies that allows service providers to deliver a high-quality broadcast video experience over IP networks by reducing time delay when changing channels and by providing error repair capabilities, explained Kip Compton, VCPBU Senior Director and General Manager. "Customers have viewed it very positively," he said. "It's an internationally deployed product."

Speaking to this award, John added, "A lot of people, just as recently as three or four years ago, said, 'Cisco, you really don't understand video.' Now they actually view Cisco as a leader in this area."

Large-Team and Small-Team Productivity Innovation Awards

The Large-Team Productivity Innovation award, Bion explained, celebrates a team that has made the job of engineers faster and better at Cisco. This year's Large-Team Productivity Innovation Award went to team members within the Network Software Systems Technology Group (NSSTG), who incorporated the concept of "Cisco IOS componentization and hardening." With this innovation, the Cisco IOS Software base can be shipped on many different products for many different market spaces without the need to reimplement the software each time.

"Componentization and hardening had been tried multiple times before," said Bion. "This NSSTG team achieved it, and not only that, and this is key, this team inserted the componentization software without breaking the existing software. There was no schedule slip; there was no 'oh my gosh, you've changed everything.' The team understood how to do a quality job that met the needs of all of its client business units."

This year the Pioneer Awards jury decided to include a Small-Team Productivity Innovation Award and used it to reward the monumental effort of a single software engineer, Todd Foggoa, who created "Scrubber." Scrubber is a web-based collaboration tool that has greatly reduced the need for managers and release management to call meetings, manage Excel spreadsheets, or use existing tools or emails to track the status of defects.

Pankaj Patel, SVP and General Manager of the Service Provider Business (SPB), commented during the awards ceremony that Foggoa's tool gets more than 5,000 page views in a single workday, saves users between two and four hours per week, and stands to save Cisco $47 million per year. In addition, Patel noted, Foggoa created this tool entirely in his spare time.

"Scrubber is an excellent example of how simple thinking and innovation can solve a problem faced by many in CDO and make a huge impact to productivity," Patel said.

Product Innovation Award

Bion described the Product Innovation award as recognition for "the team that has built a product that has changed the industry and created disruptions in the industry to Cisco's advantage." Garnering the Product Innovation award this year was the team devoted to creating the Cisco Nexus 1000V Switch. The Nexus 1000V Switch represents the first enterprise-class switch for server

John Chambers speaks with employees at

the Pioneer Awards ceremony in San Jose. John acknowledged the global nature of this year's winners, which included engineers from all over the United States, as well as from Canada, India, and Cyprus.

virtualization environments. As such, it has established the company as a player in the virtualization space. It has also led to an extremely successful partnership with VMware, and earned Cisco the Best of Show—New Technology award at VMworld 2008.

"It is truly a testament of innovation to see a small, focused and motivated team change the network paradigm with virtualization," stated Mario Mazzola, SVP, Server Access Virtualization BU (SAVBU).

At the ceremony, John praised the Server Access Virtualization BU (SAVBU) team for their innovative use of collaboration in developing the Nexus 1000V Switch: bringing together young students with experienced engineers—on a relatively small product team—who collectively were able "to outperform the giants in the industry." He added, "It isn't just about winning industry awards; when you talk to customers, they understand that this is a technology that changes an entire industry."

John, who has attended all 10 yearly Pioneer Awards ceremonies, acknowledged the global nature of this year's winners, which included engineers from all over the United States, as well as from Canada, India, and Cyprus.

"We could not be more proud of you at Cisco," John told the award winners. "We are a company that's going to change the world."

Sandhya Ashok, a program manager with the Cisco Research Center who has helped manage the ceremony in recent years, agrees that the Pioneer Awards have succeeded in fostering innovation at Cisco and helping the company to achieve new heights.

"In 2007, Cisco TelePresence won a Pioneer Award, and look what TelePresence has done for Cisco," she says. "Today, almost everyone identifies Cisco with TelePresence. It truly differentiates us from our competitors."

Kathy Hill, SVP for Development Strategy and Operations, hosted the Boxborough Pioneer Awards ceremony on November 5.

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