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Technology, Industrial Hygiene, and the Future: A Moment with Rich Karlgaard

This year's AIHce EXP opening keynote speaker, Rich Karlgaard, has a robust list of accomplishments. He understands firsthand the difficulties of navigating in today's business climate and the opportunities available to those who dare to reach out for them. When he takes the stage in Philadelphia to kick off AIHce EXP 2018, he'll be bringing decades of experience with him.

We wanted to dive a little deeper to get to know Karlgaard as we get ready to hear the "Three Megatrends and Four Business Practices That Will Shape Your Business Future." In our conversation with him, we learned about his first jobs, his first public speaking experience, and what excites him about the future of business in our connected world.

AIHA: You're an incredibly accomplished entrepreneur and speaker but I want to take it back for a minute: Could you tell us a little more about your personal and professional background?

Karlgaard: I was born & raised in Bismarck, ND. My dad was the public school athletic director for the city. I was an avid runner and ran on the track and cross country teams. We were state champs. After two years at the local junior college, I transferred to Stanford and majored in political science. Some of my first jobs were an editorial assistant to Runner's World magazine, a technical writer at the Electrical Power Research Institute, and ad copywriter for a Palo Alto agency.

In 1989, a friend and I started Silicon Valley's first business magazine that looked at venture capital and startups, and the process of going public. The magazine was called Upside. It was a big hit.

In 1992, Forbes magazine looked into buying it, but instead, they hired me to start a Forbes technology features magazine called Forbes ASAP. I ran that from its inception in 1992 to 1998, where I became a publisher and columnist for Forbes.

AIHA: What came first - speaking or writing?

Karlgaard: Well, let me tell you. The first time I gave a speech in public as a business person was in 1992 when Steve Forbes came out to Palo Alto. We held a press conference to introduce Forbes ASAP. He introduced me, and I swear to God, I couldn't say anything for about 45 seconds, which of course seemed like five minutes. I was absolutely terrified.

Somehow, over the course of the next few years, I became pretty good at it, and in 1997, an agent named Danny Stern saw me speak at a Forbes event and invited me to his agency. That began my career doing public speaking. I now do about 40 speeches a year.

AIHA: I'm intrigued by the "3 months to 3 years" time frame. There's no doubt that technology and business move fast but why three months?

Karlgaard: Business people live in a world of “3 months to 3 years.” If you’re a publicly traded company, you must report to Wall Street every quarter. At the same time, your business could change over the course of three years. You can make decisions today, next week, or next month that will impact how well your business plays out over the next three years.

To talk about the future in that timeframe is one that is relevant to the needs of CEOs, investors, corporate boards of directors, all corporate executives - because that’s the world they live in. When you begin to talk about technology’s impact on business beyond three years, that’s more in the realm of long-distance futurism. It’s interesting to read about future robots, artificial intelligence, but it’s not particularly relevant to the audience I speak to. That’s why I try to keep it in the three months to three year timeframe.

AIHA: What do you see as the most prominent management mistake C-level executives make in today's business environment?

Karlgaard: Digital transformation and the need to digitally transform is coming at us faster than before. It’s due to four or five technologies maturing all at once. One is cloud technology, which lets anybody, even an undercapitalized startup, rent supercomputer power on a 10-minute by 10-minute basis. That really levels the playing field. You don’t have to have a huge investment in computer and storage equipment on your premises. Artificial intelligence (AI) is making great strides due to this incredible computational power out there. AI funding has skyrocketed over the last five years. It’s gone from a fairly modest amount to just an overwhelming amount.

Another one is the Internet of Things (IoT). That goes to this idea that there are more than 100 billion, soon to be a quarter of a trillion, sensors out there embedded into every industrial process. All of that will feed back into a common data pool and allow the observations and analytics to be made. The whole notion of predictive analytics is gaining speed rapidly.

All of this is happening so fast. Executives that fail to take this seriously or delegate it to their IT staff are making a critical mistake. What we’ve seen over the last three years is that C-level executives and boards of directors are looking at technology beyond just “Does it ensure that we’re compliant in our regulations and ensure that we’re compliant in our financial reporting?” It’s now becoming a very strategic set of initiatives that follow from this IT revolution.

The old idea (which is not all that old) that you can delegate this stuff to your IT staff is now a critical mistake.

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AIHA: The AIHce EXP is for the IH/OH industry, which has been shifting and evolving with business & government over the past few years. What do you see as a challenge for this industry in the next three years?

Karlgaard: There are a couple of challenges - I think they’re both exciting. The Trump administration has made it a priority to roll back what they regard to be excessive regulation in many fields. This was stated once again in his State of the Union message. What will proper regulation enacted by the Trump administration - how will that play out and how will that affect industrial hygiene?

The second thing that is playing out is what I mentioned before. The IoT, better databases, more powerful computers crunching through the algorithms and making observations and predictions about the data will also affect the industrial hygiene industry. I think we're headed toward a world where we can have less formal regulation by the government and still have really good industrial hygiene. The technology is alerting us in real time whether we're moving in the right direction or the wrong direction.

A lot of countries like Singapore have embraced this idea that you don't need as much environmental and IH regulation if you get the technology right with everyone looking at the same data and reacting to it in real time. That's actually the best of both worlds.

I don't know if we'll get there in three years, but I think we're moving rapidly in that direction. I think it's very exciting for the industrial hygiene industry.

AIHA: Without giving anything away from your keynote (can't wait for it!), could you tell us what you predict to be the disruptive forces in business in the next six months?

Karlgaard: You look at technology's impact on not only how business should be structured and align themselves around these rapidly accelerating forces of cloud computing, IoT, AI, and new ways of looking at data, but you also look at the financial impact. Amazon, along with JP Morgan and Berkshire Hathaway, announced an initiative to get into the healthcare industry. As a result, the stocks of all the traditional healthcare businesses in the United States dropped precipitously just after the announcement.

The fact that Amazon, which is a leading practitioner of all the technologies I talked about, is merely thinking about or testing the idea of getting into healthcare shows that this digital transformation is now being noticed by the investor class. Because it's being noticed by the investor class, it will get the attention of boards of directors, CEOs, and the C-suite in any organization. Over the next six months, look for more announcements like that which will shift capital around, and it will get the attention.

I predict over the next six months, CEOs that are not leading the charge on digital transformation will be asked by their board of directors to leave. We saw that last year in the case of the CEO of Ford Motor. A really talented CEO in all regards, but was an automobile industry traditionalist and was thought not to be moving fast enough in this whole digital transformation area and he was asked to go.

We may see more of those CEO exits.

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AIHce EXP 2018, held in Philadelphia, PA May 21-23, is the EXPerience of the year for IH and OEHS professionals across the country. You'll be exposed to the latest trends, needs, and research impacting worker health with experiential education sessions, networking opportunities with like-minded professionals, and the tools you need to solve your workplace challenges. This highly-rated event also offers a robust virtual experience for those that want to reap the benefits of conference without the travel. Register today.

