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TD Ameritrade's CIO Has Developed A Remarkable Innovation Strategy

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When TD Ameritrade CIO Vijay Sankaran joined the company in late 2013, he did so as the Managing Director, Advanced Technology, Analytics, and Architecture. In that role, he led the company's enterprise innovation and new business ideas within the core business. He also led a new incubator called Discotech. Discotech continues to operate as a wholly-owned subsidiary of TD Ameritrade that focuses on exploring, building, and investing in emerging growth opportunities, business models, and solutions that transform lives and investing for the better. "Discotech explores some new areas that are outside of our core business and potentially represent revenue-generating opportunities for us in the future," says Sankaran. "We have learned that by applying a disciplined process to a couple of different target areas, you can uncover some nuggets that may be competitive differentiators for you in the future."

As Sankaran and his team focused on developing advanced technologies, he developed an enterprise-wide event called *thinkoffs*, which were multistage innovation contests where associates from across all lines of business came up with new ideas, pitched them, and had them judged. Sankaran wanted a process that would encourage localized thinking and solutions. The process yielded not only great ideas for the company, but some interesting insights. "[Due to the thinkoffs], we have shifted to a much more localized innovation event where teams and lines of businesses can adopt the process, and we are encouraging people to innovate in their own areas of focus just by identifying problems and applying the methodology."

Sankaran would take on his current role as chief information officer of the company in January of 2016. He has doubled down on the innovation agenda, training associates on innovation methods. Those who go through the training are deemed innovation ambassadors. He noted, "we have taken many of the learnings, analyses, and experiences that associates have had with our Discotech incubator and reapplied them into the core business.

This allows those associates to re-immerse themselves into the core business and teach other associates how the methodology and Discotech could be applied to core problems." This addresses an issue that many companies face: that by declaring that innovation is everyone's responsibility, it turns out to be no one's, as everyone focuses most of their attention on their primary responsibilities. Sankaran has developed a meaningful way of involving a much broader set of employees in the innovation process, drawing more and better insights from the team, as a result.

Then with regard to his core innovation team at Discotech, Sankaran assembled a group of cross-functional associates from the core business. He refers to them as the "tip of the spear" to investigate new capabilities. When asked to highlight some examples, Sankaran notes artificial intelligence as a key facet with two platforms. First, the content intelligence platform, which assembles education content personalized to clients based upon the needs of similar clients with similar attributes.

Second, voice of the customer analytics takes all contact centers, chat information, and email information and distills it for intent using AI. This allows TD Ameritrade to leverage chatbots and other self-service technologies to give clients a better consumer experience and allows them to find the information that they need much more quickly both on the company's website and through digital channels. "There have been other areas, such as virtual reality, blockchain, and other emerging technologies that we have explored. However, we just have not found the right use case, excitement, or value creation that AI has generated," noted Sankaran.

Sankaran has developed an impressive hybrid model, bringing together a core innovation SWAT team through Discotech, while inculcating many across the organization with better processes and tools to drive innovation, as well.

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