



MNX Global Logistics, a UPS Company: Time-Critical Speed and Precision Through AI

CapTech Trends Podcast | Episode 41

Vinnie

Hello, and welcome back to CapTech Trends. This is your host, Vinnie Schoenfelder. I've been away for a couple of episodes, but I'm back today, and I'm very excited. I think we have a very interesting podcast today. I have with me Tim Kutz, CIO of MNX Global Logistics, a UPS company, as well as Michelle Meyer, who has been on that account for how long?

Michelle

Since '22.

Vinnie

Gotcha. We're going to talk about, a little bit of automation, and how artificial intelligence has played a role in that, and really, talk through this as a use case, so a life cycle of the ideation, the implementation, the values, the pitfalls, lessons learned, the whole front-to-end. Tim and Michelle, welcome.

Tim

Thank you.

Michelle

Thank you.

Vinnie

Tim, let's get started with you. I'd like to know a little bit more about your company and what it does, and your role in it.

Tim

Sure. MNX is a time-critical logistics company, and we ship product that generally has to be there within 24 hours. The other thing about our products, they're typically sensitive and difficult to handle, so things like tissue, nuclear medicine-

Vinnie

Like a heart?

Tim

Like that, yeah, blood, those sorts of things. All of that stuff, as you can imagine, especially with the tissue and the nuclear medicine, has a lot of white glove requirements, and a lot of compliance requirements. We're pretty much the premier leader in time-critical logistics.

Vinnie

Gotcha. Talk me through the beginning of this. We spoke a little bit a couple of days ago, ahead of time, but it seems like you didn't start day one thinking you were going to implement AI, that you had different initiatives that led and prepared you for this.

Tim

Yeah, we did, kind of. When I first came to MNX, which was at the end of '21, when we shifted ownership to Quad-C, a private equity firm, the CEO, John LaBrie, was very direct about wanting to automate a lot of processes, particularly in our operations area, because there's so much touch that needs to take place. We had an automation mandate that we started in '22. There was a lot of other things we had to do to be able to do that, but we had a mandate, and John and his team really have driven that vision ever since.

Vinnie

What was the reason? What was the motivation? You want to be disruptive, right?

Tim

Right.

Vinnie

Were you doing it to reduce cost? Were you doing it to be more predictable, shorter timelines, all of that?

Tim

Yes.

Vinnie

Yeah.

Tim

Specifically, there's really two sides of it. Of course, our number one concern is our customers. There's a lot that comes with better precision, better accuracy, speed, and we want it to really improve that experience. The other side of it is the efficiency. I tend to be a believer, and so do the members of the executive team, that service becomes table stakes at some time, and you've got to be a low-cost provider. AI and automation really help you do that quite a bit.

Vinnie

When did this turn from automation to realizing that AI could play a part?

Tim

Geez, when was it?

Michelle

Q4?

Tim Kutz:

Yeah, I'd say November of '23. We officially started in about June of '22, and then, we did a lot of automation work. And then seven, eight months ago is when we really got into AI, and a lot of that was because the technology itself had started to mature enough that we could productionize it.

Vinnie

Michelle, how does that happen? You have a mandate, you're making progress on a project. Where

does this inspiration come from? Obviously, it's in the news, it's everywhere, but was there a champion on our side, a champion on your side that said, "I see what you're doing, and this is a pivot you need to make?" Where did that come from?

Michelle

I think Tim has done a really good job of just encouraging and inspiring our teams to think big, and be innovators and disruptors. One of my colleagues from CapTech, Jonathan, has been on the account for, oh gosh, probably 12 months at this point, and we've really relied on him to bring forward things like generative AI. He challenges the team to think through, the solutions that are in production, how can we make them better? How can we open up more opportunities, and drive efficiency with generative AI? Tim has encouraged us to develop POCs, and get those pilots into stakeholders' hands, and just innovate and try.

Vinnie

Let's dig into that a bit. I've been on panels before, and you talk to companies that are large, and you ask if they're innovative, and they say yes. I ask in what way, and they say, "We do a hackathon once a year." Or, "We have 25 people in an innovation lab," but they've got 50,000 employees. How does innovation have a voice in MNX? Is it part of every sprint? Is it its own thread? How do you make that a healthy thing?

Tim

Well, I think the first thing, it really starts with the executive team. Our former CEO, John LaBrie, was passionate about this, and passionate about innovation. Our current CEO, Nate Gesse, who was COO at the time, is the exact same way. It really starts there, and then I think one of the things we did early in was put in a center of excellence for automation and AI. We have people that represent business process, technical architecture and technology, finance, and we meet on a regular basis to make sure-

Vinnie

Is there an owner of that group, or is it a committee?

Tim

There is. I am the owner of the group, but the executive team meets every week with that group. We really committed not only the resources, and the mind share on it, but we've also put a lot of time into it.

Vinnie

Did you hire anybody in?

Tim

It's a great question. Even now, it's kind of hard to find people that have a lot of technical depth. I had worked with you guys in a previous life, and when we started doing this, I got with Drew, and brought you guys in. You guys brought some pretty sharp people in this. Where I found we really needed the help was understanding how to do the architecture, understanding what the technology would do, that sort of thing. That's where we really got our expertise from. We had a lot of software engineers on site at first, but now, we've really whittled that back. We've got a smaller group of both you guys and some of my guys. We have a few folks. Well, we have a number of folks that have come up to speed by learning things working with you guys. We also have an offshore group that we use, and they're pretty sharp on the engineering side of it. We've not been really looking for a whole lot of talent because we've got what we need with you guys.

Michelle

And you did a really great job of recruiting your product team, and building out that organization, too.

Tim

Well, that's a good point, too. I went back to a previous life and brought you guys in. I hired two guys early in, my VP of product who had worked with me before, and then my VP of engineering and architecture who had worked with me before, and these guys are the best there are. By bringing them in, and then combining them with you guys and some other external firms, we were able to make hay pretty quickly.

Vinnie

That's good, because I think one of the problems I see with some of the clients I talk to is, they don't

know what's possible with AI, or if it is possible, what's really a pragmatic now use case of it. In that group that you lead, it's really important to know what's possible and achievable so you're not chasing down crazy ideas.

Tim

Well, 100%. When we started, we didn't know what we didn't know. We had this list of 10 automations that we wanted to do, and there were some thoughts that, look, let's just go pick them off one by one. When we started working with you guys, it was really clear that was the wrong way to go, and we learned the importance that this stuff is all about having good data, and if you don't have good data, you're done. We really concentrated on our vendor, courier and airline communications and transactions first, so that we could get good data for our customers.

Vinnie

How good was your data, on a scale of not ready to very ready for AI? I'm not looking at maturity, but just ready for AI, before you started this, and how quickly were you able to close that gap?

Tim

I'd say it was about a five to six maybe, and that was early in. I'd say about six months, we were at a good eight, eight and a half. We're just a little bit north of that now. But the 80/20 kind of works. We're in much better shape now than what we were. For those out there that have multiple platforms, that's where the data quality, one system can look at it one way, another system can look at it another, and if you're working with both of those systems, you have to get that synchronized. We spent a good bit of time getting that done. Now, we've moved to one platform, or are moving to one platform, so it's not a big issue.

Vinnie

Yeah, it's interesting, too. I know companies now are using AI to actually clean their data so that they can use that data for AI, which is a neat-

Tim

It makes perfect sense. It's amazing what it can do.

Vinnie

Talk us through how you used it in a life cycle use case way. I know you're using generative AI, and I think I have a good understanding of how you're using it, but I can't tell the story the way you can. How are you using generative AI in your workflow?

Tim

We looked at it like, "Let's take existing processes, automate, then let's re-engineer basic processes and automate." And then, we went straight into hyper automation and AI from there. The first phase, it was all transactional stuff with our vendors, and basically, 80% of the automation was phone calls, emails, the back and forth, the checking on when something could be done and not be done, and the efficiency went through the roof.

Michelle

It was like, 50% email call volume dropped.

Tim

Yeah.

Vinnie

Again, I don't live this the way you guys have lived it. You have a resource center of people whose job it is to write these emails, make these phone calls, get the communication, do all the handling of that, and now, AI is writing those emails, or is it taking the need for emails away?

Tim

It's both.

Vinnie

Okay.

Tim

It's both. I would say we're much more mature in the handling of the emails, but we're now getting into the actual formulation of it, and doing that just through a proof of concept here soon. The basis of all that is, we have couriers, we have airlines. Somebody gives us an order, we need to associate it with an airline, they need to accept it or decline it, and there's a lot of back and forth in that whole thing before it actually gets moved. All those transactional events, we automated. It takes 10 minutes to do this, it takes 10 people to do that, et cetera, et cetera. It was a very linear labor arbitrage by using the automations.

Vinnie

For me, my old-school architecture hat on, I'm like, "Why can't we just have well-formed web services between you and the airlines, and just go direct, and make this super efficient?" I guess, when you're working with so many different partners who may not be at the same maturity level of you, this allows for that same level of integration without, or almost without having to worry about re-architecting all of that.

Tim

Well, yeah. We're in a pretty specialty field. You get a lot of customers, you get a lot of couriers and vendors that don't want to do that. They don't want to use APIs. The way we approach it is, we've got to give people multiple avenues for communicating with us, be it EDI or APIs, or automations, or AI, or portals, or whatever. We have a number of these that we now have... we really didn't have anything that was less totally integrated than APIs at the time. We're very good at that, but this has really opened it up to a lot of consumers.

Vinnie

You don't have to be as choosy with who you partner with, right.

Tim

Yeah.

Vinnie

Are you using it in that one way, or are you using AI in other ways as well?

Tim

Yeah, that was where we started. And then really, the next piece was, we got into really using RPA a lot to go out and get information from airline sites, to do route optimization, which is, when we send trucks out, or vans out, we can optimize that across multiple routes. We did a lot of machine learning work. We set it on top of our transactional systems, and it'll tell you, based on parameters, what airport to go from, what airline to pick. We did a lot of the basics on that that were really more focused at our customers. We got into, what I would say hyper-automation. Again, we used machine learning, we used RPA, we used not just the Twilio things, and those sorts of things, but other different technologies, where before, we were basically just doing MuleSoft-oriented, or MuleSoft-directed transactions.

Vinnie

Michelle, I get worried when I hear RPA website and production in the same sentence. The airline changes the website, the RPA breaks, what's plan B?

Michelle

Our teams proactively have mechanisms in place to monitor that, because that reality has happened to us. Websites have either gone down, or they're going through upgrades, and we have to change something on our end in order for them to be compatible with those upgrades. I think it's just baking those processes into your development life cycle, because it is a solution that you're going to have to maintain long-term. We learned that about, specifically that RPA and the airline solution.

Tim

Yeah, I hear exactly what you're saying. However, it does save a lot of time.

Vinnie

Is there still a manual flow where if that's down, then a human can-

Tim

Well, John and those guys built into it the validation step, to make sure what I'm getting back works,

and if it doesn't, rockets go off. We have, I don't know how many different airlines, around I'd say 10 or a dozen, and we only have trouble with about two of them.

Vinnie

Gotcha. How were you able to measure any success metrics from this?

Tim

Well, first off, we started out with time studies on the cost side of things. Based on what our calculations were, we were able to measure... we have, basically click software, or tracking software in all of our LC's, logistics coordinators' desktops, so we can very easily see what somebody's doing from a baseline to where they are now, relative to the parameters that we set. We were very diligent about measuring the number of times somebody was actually touching a transaction, and the amount of time. We started that, pretty much from day one on the vendor side of things. It's really helped us, less so on the customer experience side of things, we really haven't spent a lot of time with that there, but a lot on the internal efficiency side.

Michelle

I think with this shift to leveraging generative AI, and deploying virtual agents, we are starting to get into the business of tracking those customer interactions, and better understanding how they're interacting with MNX's external portal and such. We're going through an exercise right now to start measuring this virtual agent that we're looking to roll out across the enterprise.

Vinnie

I think it's really clever, because when I think of generative AI, my first thought is a chat window, or writing documents, or summarizing documents and those types of things. To use it as part of a workflow that's virtually replacing an agent.

Michelle Meyer:

That's right.

Vinnie

That is a very clever use.

Tim

We are very interested in reducing touches, but the goal for us is to go from the technology helping the human to the human helping the technology. This concept, this agent-based architecture that we have is very much about technology agents, or AI agents handling different parts of the business, and them all working together in a modular fashion. It's pretty slick.

Vinnie

That's good. Thank you for that. That tells a good story. I want to go back to the beginning, and talk about some of the hurdles you had to overcome, and then, maybe some lessons learned. Fear, uncertainty, and doubt. Were there naysayers? Was there a gap between business and IT? Did you have to convince groups, or individuals, or the organization that this is actually a good use for AI? Don't be afraid of it, this is going to work. Was there an uphill, or were they so receptive that it was-

Tim

Well, when you've got a CEO and a C-suite that's saying, "You will do this," we didn't have a lot of resistance. Beyond that, I think people really saw the value in it. I'll give Quad-C a lot of credit, too. They believed in us, and they put the money into doing this. It wasn't an uphill battle from selling the concept, or the technology. We had very good leaders, and we had people that were in the organization that were very open to it. You mentioned the IT/business relationship. It's so critical all the time, as you know, but it's really critical here.

Vinnie

I've got a theory, I think I shared with you the other day, that one of the tells of the health of an organization is how narrow or wide the gap between business and IT is. The wider that gap is, you're not going to innovate. You become a task doer as opposed to a partner. Did that shrink as you did this?

Tim

Well, there was two things. One is, we had an IT transformation that we needed to do, which was not only putting in these new capabilities, but using that as a catalyst to completely rebuild our IT

organization, which we did. I mentioned those two gentlemen before. We didn't have well-defined products. We didn't have any architecture at all. We spent time, and again, I'd worked with these guys before, and they brought in folks, to really build out the processes you need in IT to deliver well. I'll put the team against anybody nowadays, and if you look at our sprint success, it is pretty amazing. We had that gap to close. We didn't really have a great relationship with the business because of that, but we fixed that pretty early in.

Michelle

I also think, you worked to spin up that center of excellence, where you weekly brought together the executive team across IT and the business, and it just enabled collaboration. We had hard conversations some days, and we were able to roll our sleeves up and problem solve together. I think that center of excellence concept, not only from just a product and delivery excellence perspective, but bridging that gap.

Tim

100%. I think the reason for me that, in this particular instance, or in automations and AI, that the IT/business relationship is so important is because there's some uncertainty in AI. You say, "Look, I think I'm going to go for this," but when you put something in, yeah, maybe you can get that, but you might get something completely different, or you might get nothing that you expected.

Vinnie

It's not deterministic.

Tim

It's not deterministic, and you've got to be a tight team of business folks and IT folks that are willing to take some of those chances.

Vinnie

Well, it speaks to culture. Machine learning, and certainly AI, you're not going to get it right the first time. Fail fast, whatever, it's testing and learning. It's trying and learning and trying again. Not only is that going to happen when you start, it's going to keep happening.

Tim

Oh, absolutely.

Vinnie

Did the culture have to adapt to that style, or was that not so bad?

Tim

I would say at the beginning, it wasn't so bad, because things were rolling along. We were taking immense cost out of the business, and seeing all kinds of gains. But then, when we got into some of the more difficult stuff, the actual use of starting to use AI and some of the other technologies, the benefits didn't come as fast. There was a little bit of everybody looking around, but we adjusted. We went through about two or three months of that, and then we all level set with each other that, this is the way this is going to be. Now I'd say, especially with Nate, we're so close together on this.

Vinnie

This was successful. There's been immediate benefits to the customers, to the bottom line. Are there efforts to say where else and how else can we use this?

Tim

Yes. Right now, we're working a lot on our operations, which is where we've been focusing mainly for the last 15, 18 months. Where we're starting to expand into now is really more into the customer experience. It's not just a matter of the automations and AI that go into that, but it's also modernizing our core platforms to be able to work better with the AI, and it's going to have a compound effect for our customers.

Vinnie

I think it's great, because there are early adopters and disruptors, like yourself, and there are people on the sidelines waiting to get in. I think the message I'm hearing from you is, if you're on the sideline, you better get going, because not only are you winning in what you're doing, but it's giving you momentum to continue to do more, and continue to win more, right?

Tim

100%. If you're not into this now, I would say you better get into it fast, because it's real. I think the other thing too is, people hear AI, and see all this stuff in the news and television, and think it's this daunting thing. It's not. It's something new. It's like cloud, or anything else that you need to understand. You need to get people in to help you, but it is moving so fast. Nine months ago, we were looking at using a business rules engine to help us make some decisions on things, where we would've had to codify all of our SOPs, all of our notes and everything else into this. Now, we just use gen AI to sift through all of that stuff. I can't even imagine what putting in a business rules engine would've taken, and then the support and everything behind it. Now, it's a week worth of writing a prompt.

Vinnie

This speaks to, you better have good architecture, because whatever you're using now, in 14 months, you know it's going to be different. How do you plug and play those components?

Tim

We just evolved our architecture. We started out, as I mentioned, with the vendor stuff, with Twilio and MuleSoft, and some of the basic tools, RPA and that stuff. We were very careful about the architecture, not to get too intertwined, and here recently, we've just made this shift to the agent-based AI technology, now that it's much more mature and secure. That gives us all kinds of abilities to patch pieces together, to do different things.

Michelle

To be modular.

Tim

To be modular, to not only be proactive, but to be predictive.

Vinnie

Right. Michelle, I don't know this about you. Do you have any coding in your background?

Michelle

I think I coded on a MySpace site way back in the day, HTML.

Vinnie

Being a less technical person in this space, where you're an engagement lead on an account like this, and AI is coming in, is that intimidating? How did you prepare yourself, learn, so that you were active in these conversations?

Michelle

I think first of all, CapTech does a really good job internally of sharing what we're doing across accounts, or just ideas that people are bringing to the table. We showcase those to each other all the time. I think having those conversations internally has been really good. Additionally, it's just reading articles, Wall Street Journal, looking at Forrester, Gartner. Tim and I have very honest conversations quite regularly on gaps that we might have on our team, and who we have internally at CapTech to fill those gaps. I've never been intimidated, maybe that's a little bit naive. I think to me, it's an opportunity to completely transform the way that this company does business, and it's really cool to be a part of that. I rely on the right engineers, and the talent to support that vision.

Tim

I think one of the things, Michelle, that you do really well for me is, you have a strategic and a visionary perspective. You can get a lot of the tactical all the time, but to be able to do that and then you know where to go, you know the people to talk to, I think that's really helped us quite a bit to hit the mark.

Vinnie

Second to last topic, lessons learned. If you could go back in time and tell your former self, "Hey, you might want to be aware of these two things," what would you tell yourself?

Tim

Well, I think we got this one right, but you've got to realize that data is really everything to this. If you don't have good data, you're just perpetuating bad stuff. You mentioned it, I think another thing that's really important is architecture, and we didn't necessarily do that right at the very beginning. I think a third thing, and I mentioned this before, but you've got to have good IT processes and tools-

Michelle

DevOps.

Tim

To be able to do this well.

Vinnie

Automated testing, DevOps.

Tim

Yeah, if you struggle with that, and you get into this world of AI with new technology and less predictability, it's messy,

Michelle

I think it's good too, Tim, that you let us slow down to get the automated processes in place as it relates to our delivery process, the DevOps, et cetera. A lot of clients will want to just go really fast to get something to market, not knowing that there's a lot of manual work going into getting a release into production.

Vinnie

Yeah, it's like adding a whole level into your house with a horrible foundation.

Michelle

Yeah.

Vinnie

It's not going to go well.

Tim

I think the last thing I'd add, Vinnie, this whole approach of, "We want to automate this, we want to automate this, we want to automate this," you can't look at that as a menu that you're going to cherry-pick. You've really got to have a vision of where you want to go and a strategy of how you're going to get there, and it may not be necessarily the things that you want, that you need to do first.

Vinnie

I think one of the interesting things, when I think about AI, everyone knows about it now, but in my opinion, it should be hidden from most user experiences. It shouldn't be like, "I'm choosing the AI button now." You're using AI in a way that radically improves the customer experience without them even knowing that's part of the process.

Tim

Yeah.

Michelle

That's right.

Vinnie

Yeah.

Tim

100%. One of the things that we're working on right now is optionality. A lot of our businesses, you give us an origin destination, pair in a product, and we're going to tell you to ship it this way. Now, with AI, what we're able to do, we're able to look at weather, we're able to look at traffic patterns, we're able to look at pricing. We're able to look at all that stuff together, customer notes, unstructured data, and come up with, "Here's three or four choices for you. Which one do you like best? Here's the reason why it's a choice." That's going to be transformational for us.

Vinnie

I guess that's my last question. Where are the humans in this process? Are these humans in places now because the technology has a gap, or there's a trust gap? Do you see those gaps closing? Do you see, in

another year or two, that a lot of these human parts of the workflow are going to continue to be minimized?

Tim

Our logistics coordinators are the best in the business. How they're migrating with this technology, we are always going to need strong exception management. They're really complex problems, and validating that we got the right solution, that's a good place for folks. The other thing too is, being a customer advocate, really talking to the customers, not spending so much time solving problems, but how can we service you better, which is a higher order capability. And then, the third thing is really analytics on this, because there's so much more information that you get, and so many more decisions that you've made, and by mining that using AI, you can come up with insights and trends. That's how we envision our LCs are going to migrate with the technology.

Vinnie

Well, to your earlier points about other previous revolutionary technologies, it often takes the mundane out, and allows experts to be experts.

Michelle

That's right.

Vinnie

And not bog people down with the monotonous tasks.

Tim

The fact of the matter is, we're a growing business. When we put people in those higher order functions, we can expand and have AI, we can expand our volume, our revenue base, and not have to add a whole bunch of people doing repetitive tasks.

Vinnie

Hey, last question. I'll put you both on the spot. I'm a person listening to this. I want to follow your example, I want my organization to be disruptive. I want them to embrace this. In your organization,

what are the first couple of things you should be doing to help your organization get on this path? We can say get off the sideline, get in the game, but how do you do that?

Tim

You go first.

Michelle

Me first? Okay. I think you have to try. You have to take chances, do the research, get your hands a little dirty, and be okay with failure and learning.

Vinnie

Maybe some pilots, some quick wins?

Michelle

Yeah, I think that's always a part of every engagement I'm part of with my clients, pilots and POCs, and experimenting on a very small sliver of functionality. That's what we did at MNX. We were like, "I think we can add some sort of LLM or RAG model here to enhance this prediction engine that we built on top of ML," and that's exactly what we did. We showed the business the sliver of functionality, and the power of it, and they were like, "Let's do that all over the place." I think just proving those use cases.

Vinnie

So a quick POC wow factor.

Michelle

That's right.

Vinnie

Okay.

Michelle

More succinctly said, Vinnie, yeah.

Vinnie

Well, I had time to think about it.

Michelle

Put me on the spot.

Tim

Similarly, I would say educate yourself, understand what it is, and in doing that, it's probably best to get yourself a good guide dog that could take you through it, so you can begin to understand it. I think the POCs, they're extremely important because it takes this amorphous thing called AI that everybody's afraid of and makes it real. That, to me, was really helpful. The other thing too is, you've got to commit to it. You've got to make an investment in it. "I'm going to put this much into it, and I'm going to see it through," because there's bumps along the way, and it's not something where you can spend a few bucks, and if it doesn't work, "I'll try something else." You need to make an investment, both financially and also with the time of your organization, with your people.

Vinnie

Gotcha. Well, thank you both for joining. I want to say, I'm impressed. There's a lot of people pontificating about AI, but to actually jump in with both feet, have wins, being innovative and transformative takes courage from an organizational standpoint. Congrats to your organization for doing that, and being successful doing it. For those listening, yeah, it's time. Get busy, and it's fun.

Tim

It is.

Vinnie

If you're into this stuff, this is the kind of stuff that you look forward to, the big shifts, the big changes. It's not as scary as it seems. Thank you guys again.

Tim

Sure. One thing I would just say in closing, we couldn't have done this without you guys. We really couldn't. A great group of people. I tell Michelle, I've yet to have a bad CapTech person. With the knowledge you guys have brought to the table, we couldn't have done it without you.

Vinnie

Great.

Michelle

Thank you.

Vinnie

Thank you so much.

Tim

Thanks.

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