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Knowledge 2025 special, part 1: How to drive successful innovation at scale with Karel van der Poel, ServiceNow

Capgemini

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[00:00:00] The number of hours out, let's say, enjoying the Vegas nightlife compared to the number of hours to then recover from enjoying the Vegas nightlife. That that scale tips, doesn't it? As you get a little bit older.

Welcome to Cloud Realities, an original podcast from Capgemini and this week, a conversation show, exploring scaled and commercially aware innovation and how you can use it to grow your top line. I'm Dave Chapman. I'm Esmee van de Giessen and I'm Rob Kenahan, and I'm delighted to say that joining us is Karel van der Poel. He's the SVP of products at ServiceNow and has driven their innovation programs over the course of the last decade and contributed hugely to the organic growth of that organization. Karel, what a pleasure to see you today. How are you doing? I'm very well, Dave. Thank you for having me on the show. It is a real pleasure.

[00:01:00] I'm looking forward to, uh, to digging into some of the things that you've done. The scale is, the scale is amazing. Before we get to that though, I just wanted to touch on ServiceNow's big conference, which called Knowledge 2025. It is happening in May, uh, right now. In fact, may the sixth to the eighth at the Venetian in Las Vegas.

So Karel, what's on the agenda for the show? There's, there's so much going on at the shows at the big tech shows this year. You know, the prodigious rate of innovation actually is very visible in the announcements. So what are you excited about for that? Oh, extremely excited. We got 20,000 of our biggest friends, you know, joining us in Las Vegas.

That's our biggest conference ever. And, uh, it won't be a surprise to you, but it's all about AI and workflow and data coming together in the AI platform of ServiceNow. Hmm. It is the. Like the conference where we put our, all our innovation of the last 12 months together with all the customer stories, financial analysts [00:02:00] are there, presses there and it's gonna be a great event.

I. Very much looking forward to seeing the announcements coming out of that. And like I said, if you're listening to this on, uh, day of Release, the conference is actually happening now. So I'm sure you can see, uh, some of those announcements online already. Now EZ how are you doing? You good? I'm doing great.

I'm, he's, he's in Las Vegas, Ian, so I'm just, you know, flashback. So you now have the mental images of it, don't you? Now? I actually have, yeah. Now does it, does it occur to you as PTSD? It does or does it occur to you as nice memories? Yes, for the people? I'd say I explain to the people at home like it's the ling on steroids.

Yeah. And the actu the ING is a huge, uh, theme park. Uh, that's, yeah. Uh, but a lot of buzzing feelings, I must say. Yeah. I didn't know they had alcoholic beverages in the Alene,

so everyone walking around carrying lead a cups of strawberry daiquiri. Yeah, exactly. Yeah. A lot of slots. Machines. Yeah. Yeah. No, it's, it brings back good memories. I assume you've done a fair amount of Vegas shows over the [00:03:00] years, Karel? Uh, I, yeah. I'm afraid I have, I did the math and so it's 12 years service now.

I think out of those 12 years, we did 10 years in Vegas. Right. And then prior to that I visited a bunch of HP worlds and IBM worlds. I did the math and like the conclusion was I spent more than a half year in my life in Las Vegas. Wow. And how does that make you feel exactly? I do not wanna answer that question.

How much of it can you remember is my question? Ah, fair amount, but definitely I. I, I, I prefer to forget a lot as well. Yeah, absolutely. Well, we, we were at Google next, a couple of weeks ago, and we, we also had the conversation, not necessarily that amount of time.

I mean, that is, that's terrifying more though, that it was, it was moving up all of our most visited destinations, charts, you know, very rapidly.

I think it's probably top one or. Probably top [00:04:00] three for me at the moment. Esmee were, uh, oh, it was your first visit. Of course. It was my first, but to be honest, I actually hear Marshall saying in the back of my head, please don't do not mention David Copperfield again.

We went to a show of David Copperfield. We did it. But it's, it's, it's amazing, right? It's the, it's like once you get to a certain stage or a certain size, it, it is just no other place you can have conferences anymore. Yeah. Like it's just, you know, it's totally right when you, when you go to some of the other conference venues around the world that will remain nameless.

The logistics just don't work. They don't work. You can't get in and out of the place. There's like massive cues for cabs or buses or trains. Yeah. And, and because the shows are so massive, the, the, the, the actual execution of 'em feels really awkward and the beverages are really difficult to get hold of.

Yeah. I, I entirely agree. Vegas have got that nailed, haven't they? Yep. They do. Anyway. Robert, what's confusing you this week? Well, David, it's more of an update on a [00:05:00] confusion and I'm becoming more intrigued than confused, which is we've discussed in the past, I, we didn't discuss pivoting this piece. Uh, like did you, did you get any memo on changing the bit, Marcel, I, I am to intrigue than instead of confus the in the intrigues, like No, I'm just doing it.

I'm just doing it. I'm taking Levi. It's confusing us, but he confused. No, there you go. Then we're still confused. I mean, I mean, I dunno how we managed to get this stuff recorded. If you see, I'm taking initiative and I'm innovating on the podcast live as we go. Very on trend for this episode, Rob. Exactly.

Um, it's the, uh, big tech versus big government. And it's, the story is unfolding. So remember we had the confuse about who's gonna win. I don't know which way it's gonna go. Mm. Um, EU just announced this week, uh, because Apple haven't, they don't believe, complied with the App Store thing about opening up their ecosystem.

The big fines have arrived and there's a big, big, it's gonna go to court, no doubt, and there's gonna be lots of arbitration, all that sort of stuff. But actually the legislation landed, everybody said, ah, I'll be all [00:06:00] right. They kind of played with it, but it's landed, it's been applied. They've been seen to be non-compliant in the view of the eu.

And now big Techers, uh, the big tech wars are starting the next iteration, which is, okay, we created a law, you didn't abide by it. And I'm intrigued and confused about which way it's gonna go and what happens next in this scenario. 'cause it's actually quite, quite pivotal between the, who's actually in control properly at the end of the day.

So you, you implying in that question that the fines aren't just gonna get paid, there's gonna be a, a retaliation of some description. Oh yeah. There will, there will be a, there will be a, there'll be, you know, legal action taken. Um, the, I mean, the response from the tech companies is they're not happy as you might expect.

Now the fines aren't as big as they've been. They, they've before, but there's still significant hundreds of millions of euros. So I, I, I suspect we're going to see a very lengthy, uh, legal conversation go on, played out in the courts, et cetera, to find out where it lands. 'cause obviously tech wants to keep control of its platforms and the EU saying, no, you've got to open [00:07:00] up.

And they've thrown in one with meta around the use of data and, uh, how your personal data

has been used as well. So I think that they're, they're go, they're going to town on it basically. I mean, it feels like a sort of a pivotal moment of, of how regulation is going to, is going to play out. And for me, the, the important thing is the, is the point forward from here as we get into a world of like, of AI and agents everywhere, um, being able to sort of.

Understand how they work and maybe trust how they work becomes an important element. Es do you think? Yeah, I think so. It also feels quite layered, right? You have discussions at, at customers, we have discussions in our own company, and then you have this on alar on a large and a bigger scale, and it's, it's going all the way through to your personal data, so that makes it even more complex to, you know, what's my take on this?

I think it's quite complex, right? Do I want my data to be used to be trained? And on the other hand, yeah, you also [00:08:00] see the value of it. When you look at customers being helped and make impact in society with that same data, maybe the count is strategic. Also, maybe the, you know, regulation can't move at the speed of innovation.

You know, you get a, you get a drag effect. I wonder, I wonder, Karel, whether you've seen a a or what your take is on regulation versus innovation or whether they, they can cohabit nicely or whether there is attention in there somewhere. Wow. Yeah. Uh, it's necessary. And it's also, if too much, it becomes red tape and it grinds you down.

I think, you know, there's a reason why, uh, us tech companies, uh, thrive in the us you know, it definitely has to do with less regulations. Um, and so it's, it's, it's easier to innovate. But I'm also European, uh, you know, uh, and so I, I totally understand and, and in many occasions also agree with the sentiment that we have here in Europe.

Mm-hmm. Mm. But it's [00:09:00] becoming all, you know, like, you know, this whole notion of. You know, rewinding, globalization and trying to undo dependencies. Uh, it it, it's just really hard, isn't it? Like, you know, like even if we start hosting stuff in Europe ourselves, we probably still leverage AI engines Oh yeah.

That are running somewhere else. And, and whether they are owned by the Chinese or by, by the US or it's just all these platforms are interconnected. So I, I, I don't know how this will end or if it ever will end. And, and what like it's just very hard to predict. It's very complicated. The bit, the bit, and I actually agree, there's this globalization and the integrated supply chains are incredibly complicated and you can't just remove one dependency from another.

For me though, this is very important 'cause there's two very big things at play. The use of data and do I have control over my platform? Or when it becomes a defacto standard, must it be open? And [00:10:00] those two fundamental questions have been bounced around. The football's been bounced around the pitch for a long time, and I feel like this is going to bring it to head.

I'm confused about which way it's going to go. Do you have the right to control your platform and keep it close ecosystem or should it be open and the what is appropriate use of personal data? So I'm, I'm intrigued to see where the conversation actually goes from a societal perspective, but also from a legal perspective as well.

I'll give you, I'll give you one future point, you know, to think about. So use of data, right? We as Europeans are very concerned of use of our own private data in order to train AI and all kinds of other things. Uh, but the reality is we're already way past that point. Most of the ai, most of the AI is not trained on human data anymore.

It's been trained on AI generated data, right? Like it, so it's like some of these discussions are a little too late and, um, data is still important, but artificial data and data created by AI

is becoming even more important these days. Are, are you actually [00:11:00] saying that AI isn't interested in Dave's, um, Instagram holiday statements and photos?

This is, this is quite surprising. I, I'm sure, I'm sure Dave's holiday destination is not unique to like the rest of everybody else. So the AI has already seen that holiday destination hard. Yes. Yeah. You're the first visitor in the Grand Canyon for sure. Exactly. Oh, you've just reminded me of the time we went to the Grand Canyon and we arrived and we're just there.

The awe has inspired us all and Dave sat, or sorry, stood next to me as a park rangers walking past Dave turns to me and go, it's not as big as I thought it was, and you've never seen a faster double take from a person. That part ranger was quite taken aback that Dave, Dave was not impressed with the scale of the Grand Canyon.

Maybe, might, might have been our viewing position. I dunno, I don't know what that was. Just the way you casually said it. It's not as big as I thought it was gonna be. You know, when you [00:12:00] say something, it wasn't even meant to be a joke either of was a true. Anyway, look, thank you for that. Actually, a, a thought provoking one even though we didn't get the memo on you changing the show.

Just Rob, I'm just keeping it real, Dave, and keeping you on your toes. That's all. Exactly. Exactly. Okay, well we'll talk about that, um, after the show. Uh oh. Anyway, let's get moving. So, Karel, let, let's maybe just start with your role because it's extremely interesting and very directly connected to the ServiceNow story over the last decade or so.

So, before we get to that though, why don't you just set out your role. What was a typical day like? So a, a typical day for me would be, uh, to work with a, a lot of product teams. Typical day would be seven or eight product teams that share their ideas on new products, on new innovations. I would then shift my day to, uh, talk to as many customers.

I would have, uh, typically two or three customer conversations a day as well. [00:13:00] And getting the outside perspective on what we're doing at ServiceNow. How is new innovation being, uh, received? I. And then lastly, you maybe not on all on one day, you know, that'd be a little bit much, but like during the week, there's also a, I mean, it does sound like a very full day, especially if it was a Monday.

Can you imagine? Oh, no. On a Monday it's a little bit more internal meetings. Yes. Um, but yeah, no, I don't want that at all. But, uh, it's necessary evil, I would say. Fair enough. You gotta sit, you gotta sync the calendars. Uh, no. I prefer to actually talk with, with either the product managers or the engineers or the customers.

Uh, those are my favorite people to talk to because I always learn something new. Uh, not so much from the, uh, the, the, the internal management meetings. We, we have them because they're necessary then. That's fair, necessary evil. That sounded like a necessary. It's the same everywhere, isn't it? Yeah. It's, it, it could be evil if they go on too long.

I think we're very good at ServiceNow and we're, we're very good in, in, in keeping 'em tight, uh, and keeping them tight. [00:14:00] So, uh, that's, uh. Beauty of an American company there, there is an efficiency in a meeting you can have. You do need that little social interaction at the beginning where you all sort of align about, you know, the emotion and then you go through it and then don't drag the conversation out and move along.

Now I think there's that, and sometimes some organizations might try and drag things out much longer than they should, and maybe there's a mindfulness about the, that this meeting could have been an email type conversation. I've actually had an example of that, that now people are just asking before the meeting starts, are we into social or do, do we just wanna

talk about work?

And sometimes you just know, let's just do work. Let's not do social. And that was also, you know, that's also serving the team. I thought that was quite a, if you have psychological safety and you have like a certain team spirit already there. Mm-hmm. But yeah, why not? But some cultures find it incredibly rude if you don't have the social interaction at the beginning before you talk business.

And then other cultures, like you've just discussed, we'll go straight into business, fly through and exit, and that's how it's done. So it's quite interesting the way the [00:15:00] dynamics can change, but I like that the conversation at the beginning. Are we gonna have a little bit of a social check in, or we're just going straight to business and moving along Now, anywhere back to business.

I just, I, I hate the long intros. That's what I really Oh yeah. The, just quickly introduce yourself minutes, quickly, introduce yourself. Entire career history. Yes. Credentializing themselves. I don't need you to credential myself. I just need to know what your job is. Yeah. Fair enough. I'm Karel. I like pizza.

Move on next. Yeah. Anyway, Karel, we interrupted your, uh, your day in the life. Yeah, it's customers and internal innovation, and then a lot of one-on-ones. There's a, there's a lot of people where we just have like 15 minutes, 20 minute checkpoints. Hmm. Whether those are people that you mentor or direct reports of you or, or they're people that you collaborate with.

So there's, there's a lot of that. We have, uh, a culture of 25 minute meetings. Right. Not even a half an hour. I like that. So not a lot of time for chitchat and obviously when you, when you don't know somebody, you need to establish a relationship. But once that relationship is there, it, it's very [00:16:00] much to the point.

And, and, uh, on your point on culture, yeah, there is a big difference whether you call somebody in India or the US or the UK or, or you know, Israel for that matter. But I think the, the company culture is 25 minute meetings. If we can do it in 20, we'll do it in 20. So if we go back then to the, the conversations you're having with product teams.

So take us through the process of product development. What was the broad cycle like and how were you winding customer feedback into that and sort of ensuring that you're driving innovation, not just a backlog of requests. Yeah. So that, that's, that's a, that's a great question and I, I think the end, the real answer is it depends, uh, we have product lines that ServiceNow, that serve 9,000 customers.

Uh, and we have product lines who not yet serve any customers because they're not launched yet. They're new, right? And so we often talk about splash zones and which is, what is the risk of getting it wrong? Well, [00:17:00] obviously if you get it wrong with 9,000 customers and you upgrade them all, you, you have a very unhappy install list.

Uh, whether as, like, if you have zero customers and you're trying to get something out the door, you don't know whether you are right or wrong until you ship it. And then even if you got it wrong, you probably get feedback from one or two customers. So the impact, the negative impacts not so, not so big.

You can iterate and you can go a lot faster. So we have a very, we have two very separate development cycles. Uh, the ones that are on a six months cadence, uh, for the large established products, uh, where there's a lot at stake. We wanna make sure we, we run all the processes, checks and balances. There's a lot of work, big teams doing all the requirement

analysis.

But they're also probably a little bit more risk averse. And then you have the, the teams who are out there to get to 9,000 customers as quickly as possible, but they're at the beginnings of that journey. And, and we allow them to go faster, to be more agile [00:18:00] and also, uh, to take more risk. So there's a very, like you could basically, we have like three archetypes of products and, and they all have different, um, different management styles, if you will.

Right. And I think that's the important, that's the important thing. Like you need to have different, different management style for these products and, and that shift often if you've got a single threaded product and you're coming to market quickly, that mindset shift that goes from, I'm getting functionality out fast to get a customer base versus I've got a big customer base, I now have to be risk averse.

That's quite an, an uncomfortable and complicated shift for an organization to start to be able to deal with where risk kicks in, especially at scale, your behavior needs to shift, like you've just said. And it's quite nice you hear that you've got that multi speed style innovation approach internally, understanding that it's just some, some parts of your platform just need to work and be, work very reliably.

Yeah. So, and especially at ServiceNow, because we are a, we are truly a platform company. We're all part of the same code base. Uh, all the applications run [00:19:00] on our platform. Let's call that the operating system for business to simplify. Like, but every application uses the same foundation. And so we share, um, you know, the foundation, all the applications have the same technology stack.

I, I think, you know, one of the things, and there's been a lot of books written about, you know, innovators Dilemma is like, when do you, when do products become conservative and therefore, like product managers and, and, and, and folks don't, don't innovate and they don't cannibalize theirselves or they don't, they, they stop being innovative and all they do is like iterative development.

It, it is logical that that's the natural course of life. It is logical that once you have more to lose. You need to become more conservative. And by the way, if you got a thousand customers and you ha and you, and you have more customers coming up for renewal of the contract, continuing to use your product, then you are signing up new ones.

[00:20:00] You should be listening to your install base. Yeah. More than to the new customers coming up because they're a bigger part of your revenue. And I think one of the tracks that, one of the traps that, um, uh, that we often see is that people don't realize that that conservatism, if you're running a big product line, a billion dollar business, um, or I wouldn't say con conservatism, but being prudent, being more prudent about innovation is the right thing to do.

Right. It is exactly what you need to do. So the like. That's not, see, so you have people who are really shining startups, you have people who really shine in scaling things. You have people who are really shine in, in running things at scale. Mm. And those are three very different management styles with very different mindsets.

Well, perhaps we'll come into that in a second when we dig a bit more in into innovation, but what I'm interested in just understanding and learning a bit about was clearly you are developing new product as it's coming along, either driven by technology [00:21:00] or customer request or whatever it might be, building innovation into those cycles.

Now, there's many companies the world over have, have utilized a process, something similar

to that. But what's unique about ServiceNow I understand is that growth to a 10 or $12 billion organization organically driven through product innovation. I wonder if you've got a take on that, Karel. Yeah. Uh, uh, I was lucky to be on the forefront and actually leading, uh, a lot of that, uh, innovation.

Hmm. And I think there's a, there's a couple things that ServiceNow did really well. Uh, first of all, uh, they have a. What we just talked about, that mindset of like, what kind of leadership do you need at what stage? We talk about phase zero, phase one, phase two, phase three. And what we mean with that is phase phase zero is finding product market fit.

Phase one is then, you know, getting your reference customers. Phase two is then [00:22:00] scaling it to a hundred million to a billion. Phase three is then, you know, trying to find an aftermarket after you are at scale and, and identify the next logical product. And these are very, um, uh, everybody understands these concepts.

So we do, we do also understand that they, they do require different leadership. They do require, uh, hands, uh, you know, once the people who might be really good at phase one and phase zero are not the right people for phase two. Mm-hmm. And, and. Um, so you gotta take away ego. You gotta have the ability to just hand it off to the next person who's better in the next phase.

And, and, and having that culture of management where people recognize that, um, these are different skill sets and different, uh, uh, different mechanisms has been extremely important. So we've, we've set it up like I've been running now as being our, uh, our incubation center, if you will, for new products.

Hmm. We've had a [00:23:00] very specific view on m and a. We did a lot of acquisitions, but never for revenue, always for Talend and Tuck-in. We love to acquire small teams to help us build a new product. Mm-hmm. But we hardly ever, or we've never acquired anybody for their revenue. Right. And then like the other thing that we did is like keeping that entrepreneurial spirit alive was, was very important.

So how do you create the atmosphere and the culture where it's okay to run fast and potentially get it wrong? Like, like, I don't like the term fail fast, or what people say fail fast or fail often. Like failure is not good. You know, it's a, it happens and you need to learn from it, but like, you know, the goal is not to fail.

Like, there's too many books written about where failure is a beautiful thing that we need to celebrate. It's like, no, it's, it's something you need to learn from and hopefully not do it that often, right? Like, right, if you have to fail, you better recognize it fast, but it's not a goal to fail. Like I, [00:24:00] I'm, I'm kind of opposed to the idea of fail fast and fail off and failure is good.

Like no failure is not. You know, we're in the business of not failing. We're in the business of succeeding. What I think you're alluding to though, which I think is important, especially when you're having the rigorous conversations about moving a product through those categories and those cycles you were describing, is an element of psychological safety that you need in the organization to have kind of truly open conversations.

Yeah, absolutely. Especially in the first phases. In the first phases, there's, you know, we always say it's like, well, uh, no point on, on celebrating what works. Let's talk about what doesn't work. Right. Right. So it's like sometimes for some people it's a very direct and conflicting kind of culture that you need to be able to handle.

Uh, it's like, yeah, pat yourself on the back for about two minutes and then let's go about

talking about stuff that is not working and what do we need to do in order to fix it. Hmm. Um. Uh, that obviously you know it when you're at [00:25:00] scale, when you are a product at scale, you're looking for the things that you can amplify.

So you're actually looking for the nuggets that are going really well and you wanna amplify that because that's what you, that's how you get to scale. But in the beginning, you are trying to figure out product market fit, or you're trying to figure out why is this product not moving fast enough? Right?

You talk a lot more about stuff that's not working. So again, that's a cultural change and you gotta have teams and, and openness of people be willing to have those tough conversations. So within that scaled product management environment, I wonder if you could just define for me what good innovation looks like for you and, and why that's differentiated from product design or product road mapping or customer feedback.

I would say anything that's, well, it's a good question. Anything that starts with a plan. Is, is probably not gonna succeed. Mm-hmm. Mm. [00:26:00] That's just put a, yeah. A shock wave through the project management community. Have to convert to the new, there's a load of traditionalists. Maybe listen to this going, oh, no, no, no, no, no, no work.

Could you say that? So, uh, you know, I've never seen a business plan actually being executed. Like, you know, like, so in all seriousness, like, you know, folks like me and other executives look at plans and, and, and we're like, yeah, the only thing we're looking for is I. How do people think? You know, that's what you're trying to get outta the plan.

Right? That's a good shout. Yeah. Uh, but, but we don't believe your financials, we don't believe your product idea. We don't believe any of it. Well, you mean that estimate on required budget may not be as accurate as you once thought? So we don't, we don't. So, so first of all, we don't write business plans for new products at all.

Mm-hmm. Um, what good innovation looks like? You know, we have, uh, a very special platform like, uh, as you might know, ServiceNow is also a low-code platform in customers and [00:27:00] partners. Um, our coding applications with it already. So we have the luxury of actually looking at what are customers already doing with our platform, and if one, two, or three customers are building, let's just give an example, a solution to manage, you know, onboarding new suppliers, which is now we go like, huh.

If N is three, not one, this might actually not be a custom innovation. It should maybe be a product and something we should productize. So we have the luxury of really looking and talking to a lot of customers and see what they do. And I think customer feedback, not on how you should write an application, but what customers are, what problems customers are trying to solve.

That is the fundamental for starting innovation. Mm-hmm. Then obviously you don't replicate what customers have already built. You then need to elevate it to a much higher level. That's where the product mindset comes in. Right. And say like, hey, [00:28:00] uh, but the initial ideas, and mind you like, you know, I've been, uh, what I was running was a commercial business incubator, or what I'm running is a commercial business incubator at ServiceNow where we are developing applications.

I. That need to generate revenue within 18 to 24 months. I'm not running a lab or research or, yeah. You know, that's not, that's not where we're doing that. So there's a, there's a room for that. We have a research department, but that is more fundamental and has a longer view. So for us, always like getting the customer feedback in order to understand, are we onto

something that a customer might be willing to pay for in the next 12 to 18 months if we get it right.

Was a very instrumental starting point for any new innovation. Um, very good. So, so the start point is there, and then you've got, I would imagine a huge, a huge amount of hairs running in parallel, especially at the scale of ServiceNow in the last five years or so. So talk to us a little bit about how you actually organized for [00:29:00] that.

So, yeah, how, how is it, are you broadly kicking things off and letting them run, or are you kind of intervening as it goes along? What does that, what's the process there? So the first thing we did, uh, which is important, is we, we ring-fenced the budget because, um, any new product development from a, like, you can only spend a a dollar once, right?

And if. If I have to choose whether I spend that dollar, let's say, on marketing an existing product or marketing a new product, I don't already know what the better return on investment will be. It'll be the existing product because we figured out how to turn that, that, that investment to something, paste the bills.

So if you don't ring fence the budget for innovation, you will always lose out. Mm-hmm. Because there's always somebody who says like, Hey, but if you give that money to me, I, I can generate a, a faster return. A bigger return In the short run, obviously innovation is the lifeblood of any company. So in the long run you're [00:30:00] gonna miss out.

And then what you see is companies who do that, the only way for them to add a new product to their product portfolio is through acquisition. Right. So it, right. So ring fencing is really important if you wanna maintain organic growth. Now, how much do you ring fence? Depends, right? Like the, we, we have, we looked at, typically it's like how big do we want our incubator to be?

Um, we said, Hey, at any given time, we want seven initiatives in the incubator. Seven is a nice number. Um, uh, we can manage seven board meetings, you know, in, in a month. Uh, we can, we can work with seven teams at the same time and they're all at different stages. So we, we chose seven. And is your expectation, Karel, that all seven will ultimately go into production?

Or you might have like 50% of them in production? What does that, what kind of ratios are you working with? Yeah, like I said, failure. So, so we accept failure maybe 'cause it's a given, uh, it's not a goal. Uh, [00:31:00] so we, we actually said something else. We said, uh. Uh, we expect two new products at the minimum every year.

Right. So out of the seven and then you, you fill them back in because obviously some of them take 24 months, some of 'em take even 36 months. Some of 'em take 12 months to hit, you know, the, the sweet spot on the market. Mm-hmm. So, but rule of thought was two a year, uh, should be promoted, if you will, to uh, what we call the performance matrix.

Now, what is the performance matrix once it goes into the performance matrix? Uh, we will set targets, sales targets there will commission plans, there'll be dedicated people. And so then it becomes part of your annual planning. So now is a public company. We've got, you know, revenue predictions and it becomes part of that whole cycle.

Right? So it becomes part of the budgeting cycle. It becomes part of everything. Until then, uh, it's, it's in the incubator and, uh, it has a shared pool of resources. We also. [00:32:00] Said, we hate premature scaling. Now what I mean with that is if you, if you can't do real damage with one or two scrum teams in the beginning, then you're probably not onto something.

It's like, you know, again, it comes back to this notion of like, Hey, we know how to make

a dollar of an existing product and, and give, give the company a an ROI on that dollar. So premature scaling means you're bigger than you should be because customers have not told you that this product is good enough to really go.

Hmm. We see this a lot with startups. They hire a lot of people before they actually, um, you know, have their sweet spot in the market. Um, so they're burning a lot of cash, right? And they have to raise more money. That's even more painful in a big corporation because now I'm not burning my cash, I'm burning somebody else's cash.

Because the company could have invested that money into a product or into an [00:33:00] organization that actually is, understands how to figure out how to make a profit. So being very prudent, making sure that you have, uh, very agile and, and not avoid premature scaling. I rather have an understaffed team, slightly understaffed, right?

Let's, let's assume that you can never rightly staff a team. You're either overstaffed or understaffed. I prefer a slightly understaffed team than a slightly overstaffed team is that, you know, because of the, when you, when you have a busy team as a result of the understaffing, that they're just making fast and quick decisions the whole time because they have to do that to keep their, to keep afloat on, spot on, spot on.

They're better teams. It's like, you know, look, look at football teams. What happens when you know somebody gets a red card? Right. We were always surprised on how well 10 players can compete against the 11. It's not a given that the 11 will just walk over the 10. Yeah. Now that's an understaffed team and it's actually understaffed compared to the [00:34:00] competition and competing.

So it's a different scenario, but I'm just using it to illustrate that, you know, nobody can hide if you're understaffed. You gotta avoid, like burning up your teams, obviously then, then it's not understaffed anymore, then it's just completely wrong staffed. Uh, that's something else. But, but having the, the comradery to make fast decisions, to not sit only in your own books.

Like I'm a product manager, all I do is, you know, this requirements analysis and I expect somebody else to do that. It's like, no, you're a team. You need to work together. Yeah. You, you know what I always say, Rob, what do you always say, David? Isn't the same thing that I always say. If you want to get something done, ask a busy person.

Uh, yeah. Because they're good at getting stuff done, aren't they? Yeah. Exactly. That's true. It's a funny adage, isn't it? It also change the staffing in terms of the platform, right? Because to be honest, at first, like two years ago I thought ServiceNow is the ticketing system and it must be something that you've heard quite often.

I, [00:35:00] I assume in the last year, unfortunately. Yeah. You see such a huge change in the impact of the platform, all that innovation. Hey, Karel. No, no, no. But that's actually, that's fantastic. It's a real mind shift. I think if you look at the platform now in the workflows, but also the business side of the impact of the platform, I think is huge, to be honest.

Is that something that you're, how did you work on that to open up those innovations? So, uh, this is, this is probably a longer answer than you want, but, um, uh, so imagine that the, like I said, the platform is the shared component, right? And you're right. So we all build on that platform and it has fundamental things like analytics and workflow, and those are the things that we all, we all use and ai.

Now part of that platform foundation, uh, obviously. Their application team saying like, oh, you know, I need something additional from the platform because I'm building application

X and in order for application XI need, I'm just gonna make this up. Uh, I need dynamic [00:36:00] currency, conversion fields, you know, that need to be part of the platform.

Uh, and then the platform team goes like, oh, okay. You know, that calls us one scrum team for three weeks or whatever. So we have these dependency mappings. There's all these asks from all these app teams that they want something special from the platform. And when we said, when we started the incubator, we said like, okay, we're gonna do, we're we're, we're going to build applications on the platform, but we were going to file zero dependencies to the platform teams.

And people looked at me as like, why, why would you do that? And the rationale was pretty easy. What we said is, well, first of all, we don't generate revenue yet. So we don't have, we haven't earned the right to ask to change, to change the platform. If you are the ITSM application, you are a three and a half or $4 billion business line for service.

Now, you have every right to ask for dependencies and changes to the platform, but we said like, no, we don't have the right. Mm-hmm. We haven't earned the right. The second thing we said is like, [00:37:00] if it's good enough for ITSM and they can build a three and a half billion dollars business and a billion dollar CSM business and et cetera, surely we can write new applications on this technology stack.

So the, the, the incubator or any new product that comes outta ServiceNow, the first thing that you need to do is to say you got a gigantic technology toolkit that is already there. Your job is to leverage that. Rather than ask for new stuff. What, what I love about that example as well is how you're taking a, a robustly commercial, uh, view of the architecture.

Yeah. So instead of like, Hey, all possibilities are possible guys, let's, let's whiteboard out all possibilities. You are going No. Like, you know, it's almost like great art is created within boundaries sort of thing. You know, you can create, like, create some pressure on that situation and you're likely to get an outcome faster.

I would probably think. Absolutely. So we, we can go a lot faster. We [00:38:00] know that it's reliable and it will be commercially great. It runs on the same thing. It has the same procedures as everything else. We know how to deploy it. We know how to support it. We know how to maintain it. That's just one thing, like.

Some engineers don't like that straight jacket. Oh, no. Where you say cannot, no. They like to invent the plumbing. We need a new plumbing system. If you let an eng, if you let an engineer design a house, there'd be five heating systems. Yeah. Three water systems and four electrical systems, because it's good fun to do that.

So I'm just gonna do that. Yeah, yeah. But you'd be surprised if you explain to, especially when new engineers come in and they're like, oh, great, I get to work on the incubator. So they think they can make all kinds of technology choices, and then learners like, no, no. Your job is to basically say, here's a big toolkit.

It's got almost everything that you can imagine of. But that's, that's your world. That's where you need to choose from. And like, oh, but in my previous life I used, uh, I don't know, an in-memory database. Why can't I have a, like, you know, a special flavor? And it's like, no. And, and then, but then you explain to them, it's like, well, [00:39:00] here's why we got nine or 10,000 customers.

They all run the same stack. There's a reason why Sue is now so successful. There's a reason why we still have one support organization. Why, why we almost have zero downtime for our customers because it's, it's like, so, and most engineers actually appreciate the fact that, uh,

because they've also lived in, in, uh, in technology companies where it was all hunky dory and great and good fun to innovate.

But then once it got started chipping and customers started complaining they were doing all the support work. Yeah. Right? Yeah. Yeah. So, and, and so at ServiceNow, not so much, right, like be, because we, we know how to scale these, we know how to scale these up, down, left, right? And it's such a robust enterprise grade platform.

So that's like, you know, so they get to keep spending more time doing what they love, which is solving customer problems. And not, you know, and the oil machine that we have on, on supporting and [00:40:00] upgrading and running this thing for big enterprises is just, you know, freeing a lot of tough time up compared to, you know, previous experiences.

So we've walked through the idea generation piece and how you're winding in kind of new thinking and innovation into that process. We've talked through the sort of structuring of it how you need to. Sort of robustly, financially manage the situation. And then we've talked a bit about kinda architectural guidelines and kind of how you get speed through teams and, uh, speed through making the right technical decisions.

I wonder why most organizations struggle with this, Karel. So what, what's, what's your, what's your take on organizations that maybe you've tried innovation and, you know, it might be that they've created a lab with a bit of wacky green turf on the wall. There's moss on the wall, right. So your, your innovation success is defined by how much greenery you've put on your wall Square footage.

Yeah. Or square meterage, whichever way you, you prefer it. And that is your KPI for success. Zany, because, you know, it's, it's, uh, it's creative, isn't it? Yeah. That, well, that's it. Yeah. [00:41:00] Innovated. Well, it's exactly that. I think, I think there's a couple things. And I think it also is, it has changed over time.

Uh, uh, 15 years ago or 20 years ago, there were no such thing as platform organizations, platform companies. So an incubator would be, you would have seven projects like we have, but there would actually be seven different products with, uh, companies with their own company name and their own company branding and everything like that, right?

And it was very cool, right? Like, and you had, uh, you need to have a separate building and that building needed to have open space and it needed to be looking cool and all that kind of stuff. Um, I. And so it was trying to mimic the startup environment. And I think that has changed in the platform economy where the entire company needs to be cool, first of all, in order to attract talent.

Uh, but, but your goal is to drive innovation, not your goal is not to be cool or different. Yeah. Um, and, and, and that is something, and I came from like, you know, I, I ran my own startup and if you look at my resume in, in, in [00:42:00] the.com era, I actually ran a commercial business incubator, uh, as a VC firm. So I've also know the other side of the house.

Um, so, so it's, I think the, there are a couple of lessons learned. So first of all, ring fence, the budget, otherwise. It will only be a matter of years before somebody makes the argument to the CFO that this is a really bad idea and I could deliver a better ROI. So there needs to be top down commitment that we're running this as a program, let's help our EBITDA by stopping spending money on business development and innovation.

Yeah. You know what I mean? It's the cheapest cost cutting exercise in the world that like is absolutely to the long term detriment of the company. And if you can't show short term success, and if everything you do is cool, but potentially going to do something great for the

company in five years, but not doing anything in the short term, it's very hard to defend that.

Yeah. Mm-hmm. Right. Like, you know, like people who, who, [00:43:00] who run innovation for big corporations need to understand that this is a commercial enterprise. And so anything you can do to help the short term, uh, uh, you know, as, as well as the long term, but also on the short term goals of the company, the more.

Kansas, you are for not getting any budget cut or for, for, for getting a long-term financing. So like, you know, our program has been running for seven, eight years, um, uh, with great success and, and so, you know, uh, obviously now our, the name of the game is completely changing. We'll probably talk about that because of ai.

It's a completely different world of innovation out there, but like having g Clarity on the dollars is one thing to, uh, look for people who have that pragmatic mindset. Understand the phases that we talked about, phase one and phase zero. And then the last thing I would say is like, what we, what we try to do is don't what I always say, don't fight the mothership.

Right. Like, you know, [00:44:00] ServiceNow is a great brand name. We got one of the, some of the best sales team in the, the best sales team in the world for when it comes to enterprise software. So why would I try to build an incubation model where people would come up with their own branding and their, and hiring their own salespeople and doing, and we've seen those models.

They've been very successful in the past, in the nineties. Mm-hmm. Um, but that's not a great model. Like, you know, if you can leverage. Assets that the, the big company has access to customers a, a marketing brand name. You should, yeah. Right. The bit that always occurs to me when you've got, when you've got the benefit of creating something that's attached to a mothership to use your terminology, is you have got a scaling mechanism there that if you were trying to do this by yourself, you wouldn't have that scaling.

Mechanism. So why not use it? It's, it would be absolutely crazy not to Yeah. Because it's not, it's not always cool, right. Like Yeah. Right. You know, it's much cooler to come up with your own brand name and your own logo and, you know, have your own, your own [00:45:00] swag and your own pro processes. And it's like, there's, there's, there's things in the big organization that you need to completely shield your incubation and innovation away from.

Mm-hmm. It's the governance and the process and the oversight and the long cycles. Yeah. That don't use that. Right. But there's other stuff. Access to customers, salespeople, marketing, brand awareness. Like do use that like, you know, so you, right. You pick the beauty is you get to pick and choose the, the things that work for you.

You gotta, you gotta work, you know, go work with those. And the ones that are inhibiting you from going fast, uh, are the ones that you need to block. And you can only do that if you get exact level support. This is not something that anybody should try to do, like without C-level support. And you can only do it when the financing is guaranteed and committed, uh, for, you know, a period of time.

And otherwise, you know, it's like starting a business and getting funding and knowing that when you run out of funding, there will be [00:46:00] no next round of funding, right? And it might be great fund for a year, but you're not gonna be successful 'cause you're gonna run outta money. And it's the same thing like, you know, this thing costs money in the beginning, so you gotta, but your job is.

To get innovation out there in the hands of customers. That's the only thing that matters. Well, let's, maybe, let's maybe bring our conversation today to a bit of a close by bringing

in one of, one of the main elephants in the industry at the moment of, of ai. Um, and, and I guess specifically agen ai In this particular case, a lot of organizations proof of concepting at the moment, trying to get their heads around this stuff.

I think within our industry at least, we sort of see this year as the beginning of the scaling process of ai. So moving out of basic proof of concept into something that is more commercially aware and potentially something that's gonna drive revenue or, or cost saving depending on your, on your use of it.

But I think we're also conscious [00:47:00] of the. Just the sheer influx of announcements and opportunity and product that's kind of flowing onto the market that this kind of extreme rate of innovation that's going on at the moment. What's your take on that? And you know, by way of closing, how should organizations get their heads around that and then organize their innovation processes to take best advantage of it?

Yeah. Well let's, let's start with the latter. It's something that I typically say to a lot of customers, don't get ready, just get started. Right? Like, um, like nobody, you cannot plan for this AI revolution. And I'm, I'm still calling it a revolution because I think it's, it's bigger than August 8th, 1995.

Anybody of you knows what that date was? Windows nine five. Uh, no, it was nine five. It was the date, it was the date that Netscape went public. And we had the first overnight billion dollar company. Um, and the internet was born and, [00:48:00] uh, it gave birth to Yahoo and Amazon and all these other great companies.

Netscape Navigator, the joys of it. Exactly. Vignette templates. Let's remember how the early web was built. Yeah. Is prior to, you know, internet Explorer or, um, and so that was the massive revolution, obviously the, the birth of the commercial internet. Um, then later on we had cloud and we had mobile. And I think ai, well, I'm, I, I'm, I don't think I, you know, I'm certain the AI revolution is far bigger than all of those three combined.

Yeah. And so you cannot afford a wait in C mode. You cannot afford, you cannot say, oh, we're not ready. We need to plan for this. You cannot say we don't have the resources. Nobody has the resources. You gotta train the resources, right? They, they, they, they don't graduate from school and, you know, are like, look, we all have to reeducate ourselves.

We all need to reimagine. Uh, so this is, [00:49:00] see I told you Rob is real, it is definitely bigger than RPAI. It's definitely bigger than RPA. Yeah, for sure. No, it's, uh, and, and it's, so, it's a, it's a, it's a massive revolution. Um, if you look at what happened in the last two, three years and you just exponentially, you know, forecast that into the future, you look how fast these models are becoming better and how the capabilities then we can all see that by 2030 and four, five years from now.

Uh, you know, the world will, will be completely different. You know, the way we do work, the way we execute work, the way workflows are executed, talk about ServiceNow. You know, it will be a, a hybrid model of AI agents and humans working together, uh, to route work. Um, and, and whether that's work initiated by you or by another agent, or by an employee, or by a customer, or by another business, um, it, you know, [00:50:00] it's massive what is going to happen.

And I think, you know, we can't. So first of all, my advice is don't sit on the sidelines. Don't plan for this stuff. Just get started. There is tangible, small steps that you can implement that already have huge cost savings. So you don't have to start with re-imagining your entire business. That is the thing that bothers me most.

Like people's like, oh, you know, I thought this was going to automatically learn about our supply chain and optimize our supply levels. No, it's not, but it can help you optimize a baby step in your supply chain. It can help you make the supply chain planners be 10 times more effective at their job.

That's where we are today, right? And, and we will get there to the big, the big ideas of completely redefining industries. Uh, but it's not gonna be in one go. It's going to be step by step, by step, by step by step, right? I, I have to remind people that like, you know, some in, during the internet age, uh, in [00:51:00] 96 or somebody in 97, somebody thought that selling dog food online was a great idea.

Right. Like, you know, we, we will have those kinds of ideas within AI as well. Where we, 10 years from now, we look back like that was not an AI application. So like, we gotta try, you gotta start.

Esmee who you've been up to. Yeah. So I was doing research, uh, into user adoption about 15 years ago and trust was already on the table back then. Uh, but it was very different conversation about trust. That was more about what does this button do? Systems often failed. Bugs were common and users expected things to break.

Trust was fragile, but also forgiving. We were like, oh yeah, well, well we cannot expect it to do this or that. So if you fast forward to today and the conversation has shifted dramatically, 'cause we're now [00:52:00] automating decisions, embedding ai, orchestrating entire workflows that users may not ever see, or even employees for that matter, who knows, invisible design has become a default.

And that means trust isn't just about function anymore, it's about intent, ethics, control. So if you dive into like what Harvard Professor Sonner suture is saying in the power of trust, she says, people don't trust you because you're perfect. They trust you because of how you behave and things go wrong.

So how do you design for that kind of trust, especially in enterprise platforms that run at massive scale. So I was really curious, you know, what's your point on that, Carol? Wow, that's a great question. Uh, I think you're touching upon something that. Uh, that is very real, right? Like, um, uh, AI trust, AI governance, uh, but also like, I don't think, so we have this internal, internal, [00:53:00] uh, debate as well.

If you automate a workflow as you, as the example that you gave, there's, there's multiple ways of doing it, right? You can use the traditional workflow boole and logic if then else. And when you do that, uh, every time that workflow is invoked, it follows exactly the same step. So there is an audit trail and you know exactly what is being, what is happening, and if anything goes wrong, you, you, you just change the bullion logic of that workflow.

Uh, so that's one that's not a black box, you know, it's still invisible, but like there is, there is a prescription on how things are being executed. Mm-hmm. Now, some of the steps in that bullion logic. Uh, could be executed by an AI agent. So now we have a playbook and says like, Hey, step three in that playbook is invoke an agent and that agent needs to look up something somewhere or do something and come back.

And then we continue the workflow. That's still like the, how the agent does it is still a little bit like invisible design, but overall you're [00:54:00] still, um, you're still, you're still following the script. And then the last thing, and this is the thing where like, you know, what is happening really quickly is we go away with the boo and logic.

We just learn an AI agent on how to do stuff. And that is the scary part because then is what

customers are saying. It's like, well, how did he learn that? Or she or he, I dunno, what is an agent? A he or she. Oh, that's interesting. Huh. Um, but that, that is interesting, isn't it? I never really thought about It's not, should be an, I hope it's a she he could use more.

She, I think it's a she. I think it's a she. Yeah. Yeah. So how does she does that, right? How did she do that? Um, they, so how does the agent know how to do certain things and where did they pick up their trades? What data was it trained on? And like, you know, get all these questions. So data transparency, AI transparency, uh, AI governance, uh, understanding is, and being able to, to explain to customers why agents are behaving the way they're, they're behaving is becoming incredibly [00:55:00] important.

You know, it's even becoming more important with all the geopolitics going on. Mm-hmm. Um, and that's more the data aspect of the, of, of, of the equation. Uh, it's not only the AI stuff, but also what data and what are you trained on? I think that also touches upon what Tristan Harris says. He's a former Google design, uh, ethicist, and he says You can't separate design from values.

So every UX decision, every u uh, AI rule, every default setting communicates something about who you are as a company. And I think that's so fascinating. Na 'cause, uh, mo gov also said that, that we should treat AI as educating our kids. Like, if we help them grow as who we want to become, uh, then AI and all our agents will behave in, you know, the most perfect sense of expressing our values.

Is this something that you're also working on in terms of innovation? Is that also based on the values of ServiceNow? Does that come into play at all? Uh, I think this is more a question of like the folks who are [00:56:00] actually developing AI engines. Mm-hmm. Um, so like open AI and, and, and, and Google, et cetera.

So at ServiceNow we leverage those engines. We're agnostic. Uh, um, we do. So we spend a lot of time on helping organizations to. Uh, tackle that first topic that you, that you had. So we have an AI governance framework that, uh, will allow organizations to track where is AI used in the enterprise? What, which, which data, my data is being used to train AI in the enterprise.

How often did it get it wrong? What was the impact of, of the AI giving a wrong recommendation? What do we do to mitigate it? So those are all the things that we help organizations with, whether it's our AI or somebody else's ai, to start tracking and to start building a governance structure and a legal structure about, uh, because obviously it's one of the things that organizations also need to start publishing at some point is like, where are you using AI and where are you using autonomous agents?

And where are you, [00:57:00] where are you automating decisions without humans in the loop? And how, how do you protect that this, that the decisions that have been derived from, those are the right ones. So on the first one, um. I actually think that's almost an outdated view. I think, you know, I think, you know, it will just be a matter of time before AI agents will treat, uh, humans as children.

Hmm. So I think, you know, the, the, that treat the agents as and train them as, as, as children. I think that was something that was applicable two, three years ago. But I think we're a little bit further than that already. I think we're, we're pretty close of, you know, last time you have a conversation with Jet GPTI think we're now Jet.

GPT is, is becoming, you know, almost our, our shrink in our, our, you know, our psychiatrist. So it's the other way around already. Like the, the, the, the technology's moving so fast, I

think in three years. Uh, and that's also the scary part and the uncomfortable part, right. Like, you know, uh, but, but there's no stopping it.

[00:58:00] Like there's, there's such great things that we can do with the technology and there's such horrendous and horrific things you can do with this technology. Right. And I think that is. The, the crossroad for humanity is like, how do we make sure that we truly go after, I'll give you an example, an an AI medical doctor, you know, will be available like at the highest level, right?

The highest knowledge level possible for anybody living in a rural area around the world. Think about Africa, where we do not have doctors in every village. They can now have a world clause, not just somebody who flies in, who's hobby and who's, like very passionate and motivated by helping people. No.

Again, they can have the world's best physician and medical doctor. It's a virtual one. But with, with some, with some clever technology, you can self-diagnose. We can, we can do so many things. So if you think about the impact on healthcare, if you think about like, you know, all those kinds of [00:59:00] things, there's great stuff.

If you start thinking about the defense industry, there's also very scary stuff. Like, you know, I don't, or if you think about, you know, the impact on democracies and, and, and news, like there's all kinds of stuff that we need to figure out. Um, but this technology is here to stay. It will move fast. And it, it's, it's, it's scary and exciting at the same time.

Well, on that note, I think we will, uh, draw our conversation today to a bit of a conclusion. Karel, thank you so much for such a thought provoking and very helpful and practical take on large scale innovation. It's been a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you so much. Thank you for having me. Now, we end every episode of this podcast by asking our guests what they're excited about doing next, and that could be something in your personal life, like you've got a great restaurant booked at the weekend, or it could be something in your business life.

So Karel, what are you excited about doing next? Uh, I'll go with a personal one. So, uh, it's spring again. I'm a vivid cat, [01:00:00] Moran sailor. Uh, I live here, uh, on the, uh, north coast of the North Sea. Mm-hmm. And, uh, we've taken the boat out for a couple of spins. Very nice. So, uh, I'm looking, I'm looking forward to, uh, to, uh, you know, go out on the still very cold water.

I was literally going to say the North Sea is a freezing body of water. Do you ever, do you ever go and take it into any warmer locations? Yes, I did. Uh, last November I was fortunate enough to sail in syn Bart, which was, oh no, that's more like it. That's more like it. That's more like it. Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Probably That was beautiful, like hard work. Well, it's like a lot of wind and big wave. So hard work, but, you know, 30 degree weather, 30 degree water, you know, it's all good. Yes. Couple of rums, couple of rums on that at the end of the day. Just a couple. Just a couple. Just a couple of cars. Yeah, of course. If you would like to discuss any of the issues on this week's show and how they might impact you and your business, please get in touch with us at Cloud [01:01:00] realities@capgemini.com.

We're all on LinkedIn. We'd love to hear from you, so feel free to connect in DM if you have any questions for the show to tackle. And of course, please rate and subscribe to our podcast. It really helps us improve the show. A huge thanks to Karel, our editing wizards, Ben and Louis, our producer Marcel, and of course to all our listeners.

See you in another reality next [01:02:00] week.

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