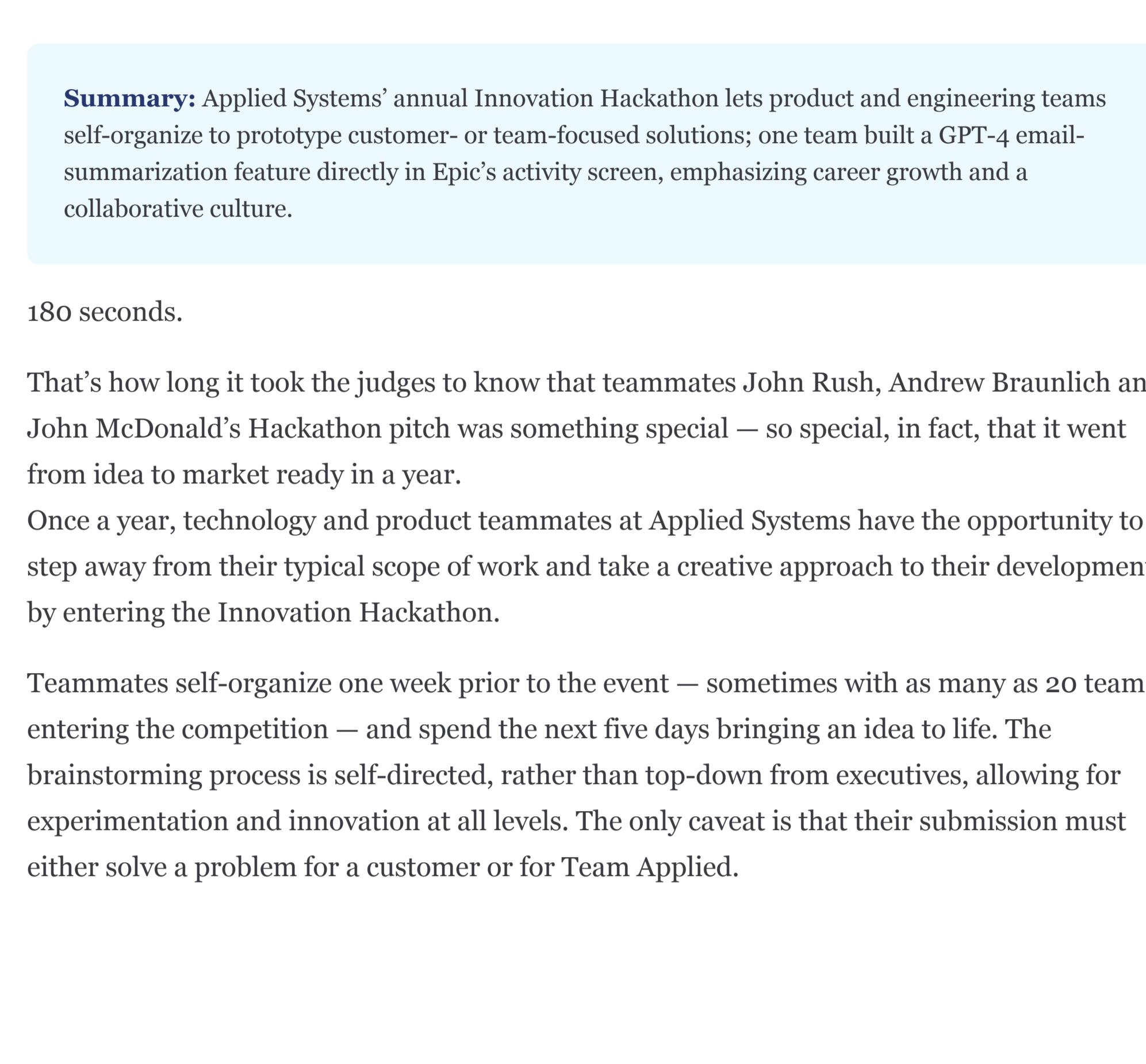


Applied Systems Engineering Team

Career Growth: Inside the Hackathon That Transformed the Customer Experience

Read the interview with Senior Associate Product Manager John Rush about how an idea transformed the customer experience.

 Written by Taylor Rose
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Summary: Applied Systems' annual Innovation Hackathon lets product and engineering teams self-organize to prototype customer- or team-focused solutions; one team built a GPT-4 email-summarization feature directly in Epic's activity screen, emphasizing career growth and a collaborative culture.

180 seconds.

That's how long it took the judges to know that teammates John Rush, Andrew Braunlich and John McDonald's Hackathon pitch was something special — so special, in fact, that it went from idea to market ready in a year.

Once a year, technology and product teammates at Applied Systems have the opportunity to step away from their typical scope of work and take a creative approach to their development by entering the Innovation Hackathon.

Teammates self-organize one week prior to the event — sometimes with as many as 20 teams entering the competition — and spend the next five days bringing an idea to life. The brainstorming process is self-directed, rather than top-down from executives, allowing for experimentation and innovation at all levels. The only caveat is that their submission must either solve a problem for a customer or for Team Applied.

Photo: Applied Systems

In spring 2024, John Rush, a Senior Associate Product Manager, and Senior Software Engineers Andrew Braunlich and John McDonald became the *Email Flamingos*, and unlike their namesake, they took flight in a bigger direction than they could have anticipated.

We sat down with Rush to learn more about the hackathon, the solution his team delivered and what came next.

John Rush

Sr. Associate Product Manager • [Applied Systems](#)

Applied Systems is an insurance technology company that creates products for agents and brokers related to customer self-service, business analytics and application management.

How did you decide to team up?

We had previously worked together on the maintenance of the main activity screen for our Epic product and had a shared interest in solving a workflow issue within the platform, so it made sense to combine forces for the hackathon.

Tell us more about the workflow issue and how you added in the AI function.

Previously in Epic, customers had to manually attach an email to a client file, which meant navigating out of the activity screen and then back in to attach the email and add any notes.

Once we began scoping out the project, we realized that we could not only streamline this workflow for our customers but could also build in an AI assistant tool into the workflow, enabling customers to attach messages and generate summaries without ever leaving the activity screen.

What was the reaction to the AI feature during the Hackathon?

The generative AI email assistant uses generative pre-trained transformer technology (GPT-4) to summarize email chains and notes, the key participants, dollar or other amounts, with only the click of a button.

Despite the brevity of hackathon presentations (usually capping out at three minutes), the judges immediately recognized the value this would deliver to customers and leaders quickly green-lit the tool for further development and implementation. This was a rare situation where something built in the hackathon was not only put into production but taken from that stage to market within a year.

Epic Email Success

The pilot for the team's email workflow revision saw massive success in adoption, recording:

- 21,305 clicks
- 62.4 percent of program participants stated that the feature accurately summarized their email content
- Used 2.29 million times, 1.8 million since January 2025
- Average retention of 70 percent month-over-month from users

Photo: Applied Systems

What happened next? How did you begin rolling the feature out for customers?

We initially rolled the product out in a pilot program where 47 agencies tested the functionality of the tool. Their feedback was invaluable and led to the implementation of another feature within the tool, the "Summarize Last Email Only" option, which enables you to add in new information without re-summarizing the entire chain of communications.

During the pilot, we recorded 21,305 clicks, with 62.4 percent of program participants stating that the feature accurately summarized their email content. Since its formal launch, the tool has been used 2.29 million times, with 1.8 million just since January of this year and an average retention of 70 percent month-over-month from users.

Last year I had the incredible opportunity to attend Applied Net, the annual conference for Applied Systems users and the broader insurance community, where the summarization feature was unveiled on the main stage. The reactions from the crowd as they watched the demo were incredible — it truly sent shivers down my spine. To overhear someone turn to their coworker and say, "Oh wow, this is so cool, I can't wait to get my hands on that," gave me a profound sense of pride in our work.

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