

[00:02:09] **Rudden:** I grew up in South St. Louis. I've been a St. Louis kid my whole life. Dad was a cop. Mom was a teacher. You know, we were Catholic school kids because that's what you did when you lived in South St. Louis. You went to church and you played soccer, I guess. Dad was a policeman, so I figured that was my journey. So I did volunteer work with the St. Louis Police Department. I was involved in the police explorers. I went to college and got an associate's in criminal justice and went to take the tests with the police academy.

[00:02:41] **Rudden:** That was just sort of what I was expected to do. Right There was a point in time where I had been working security for National Supermarkets and they went on a business and my dad was working what they call secondary CPI corporation, you know, making sure the parking lots were safe and things like that. And he said they're hiring for some folks to travel around the country and build studios as CPI owned Sears portrait studios. So they're hiring to build studios and do some computer stuff. So I went in and I interviewed and interviewed consisted of, do you know anything about construction? And I said, I built a broom in my mom's basement and they didn't know anything about computers. And I said I took some classes in high school and they said, great, here's the keys to a van, we needed to go to Florida for three months. So, yeah.

[00:03:30] **Nichols:** Oh my goodness, and how old were you?

[00:03:32] **Rudden:** Twenty-one, twenty-two somewhere around in there. So that was really my first experience with technology because we were putting in new hard drives and camera systems and that was sort of the first digital photography experience. So as I progressed in CPI, digital photography was evolving. So I got to be involved in the computing and the photography and the digital stuff and then the online you can go online and see your pictures instead of having to wait two weeks to see that your little brother had blinked. Right. And so that was really kind of the kick off to technology. Right. At one point when I was on the road, you know, my dad called and said, hey, your number has been picked. Time to go the academy. And I said, no, I don't think I want to do that. I'm going to stick this out and see where we go. Right. So, you know, he's taken in a different direction.

[00:04:25] **Nichols:** So how long were you at CPI?

[00:04:27] **Rudden:** I was there for 10 years. So 1995 to 2005. So I did a lot of the helpdesk origination. That was when we realized that you've got portrait studios all over the country, and when things break, they need help. Right. Project management. Project engineering. I really got

to be on the frontlines of like digital printing in the in the studios. So it was fascinating to me because it was all new. I left CPI in 2005 and went to work for Picture People that was owned by Hallmark at the time. And I was in charge of like launching their e-commerce where people could buy photos online and things like that. And that was great experience. I was commuting from St. Louis to San Francisco every week. So I flew out Sunday or Monday morning and flew home every Friday. Yeah, I was it was a heck of an experience, right. One of the coolest things was we sponsored a NASCAR. We partner with Kodak. And so PicturePeople.com was on the back of a race car. I got to go to a NASCAR event and I learned a really, really great lesson at that event. So was never a NASCAR guy, right? I'm a baseball kid. I've been a Cardinals fan my whole life.

[00:05:36] **Rudden:** There's a man who's called the wheel man. And his job is to lift the wheels over the over the wall so that the guys can screw the wheels on to the car and then they can tear off out of the pit. So there's this giant man sitting on a stack of tires with this pink glue, and he was meticulously gluing lug nuts over the top of the holes. And I realized that guy is probably one of the most important things. One of the most important pieces of this entire race. Because if he doesn't get it, spot on. That wheel doesn't that wheel doesn't go on. They can't do what they need to do in those three seconds. They need to be in the pit. And it started to get me to think about the little things and how, you know, you've got these super famous race car drivers. But this guy makes that guy what he is today. It was yeah, it was really neat.

[00:06:31] **Nichols:** There's no small role, really. Right.

[00:06:36] **Rudden:** No at all at anywhere in the pipeline. So that was really that was really interesting. So I ended up leaving the project really ended with Picture People. And I came back to St. Louis and started working as a contractor for Mastercard and worked on a neat project where you tap your card and you ride the subway. Right. And then I moved into being a software development manager and support and things like that. I ended up about a year and a half before I left Mastercard and moved to Panera. I took a job being in charge of fraud investigations and I thought, this is it. This is where God wanted me this whole time. And it was going to be a cop, right? Here I am now. I'm like this technology cyber cop. Right?

[00:07:16] **Rudden:** It all made sense. It all lined up. Right. And through that journey, I realized how far away from the customer I was. I wasn't able to do things that directly helped my dad with his card in his wallet. Mastercard is so big and there's, you know, so many banks that are customers and so much technology. And I realized what my real calling was, was to serve

people to be closer to people. And that was the connection that I needed to make. And so an opportunity presented itself a Panera and I jumped on it. And the rest is history. It's been the greatest almost six years of my career. And just a quick nod to John Meister, because without John's support and leadership and trust sort of in the vision of what we wanted to create, there is no way that we could have done it right. And that's a big risk on John's part as well, because what we committed to was not just changing a helpdesk. Right. We needed to change the culture, change what we did and how we served people and how we served each other.

[00:08:24] **Nichols:** So John was at Mastercard and left and went to Panera. And then, like you said, the rest is history. When you were that young man at 21 traveling, setting up these CPI labs and studios, did you have any idea where your journey was going to take you? You had no idea. Couldn't see what the future was going to hold.

[00:08:47] **Rudden:** None whatsoever. Really just kind of enjoyed what I was doing in the moment. I was a young man. I had per diem and I had a hotel and I had, you know, a van. And me and my partner were just cruising through Florida. And then they sent us to California on jobs and they sent us to New York. So I was traveling the country, right? I was.

[00:09:05] **Nichols:** You were loving life; living the dream.

[00:09:07] **Rudden:** Oh, man, I really was.

[00:09:09] **Nichols:** It's amazing, though, because just giving you that opportunity started you on a whole different journey in this tech journey. So let me ask you this. I'm sure you became his offer development manager. You did things that weren't necessarily things that you'd done in the past. So how did you navigate that, J.C.? I mean, did you get some formal training from Mastercard or was it all learning on the job?

[00:09:34] **Rudden:** So from the from a digital photography aspect to things that really helped me to understand, computing and processing, moving into the e-commerce, you know, launches really helped me to understand all of the things there. But I really learned more trusting the people that were way smarter than me. Right. The people that really knew, you know, the .NET code that we used for Picture People. I was the guy that would say, look, help me to translate this. Right. Help me to understand, you know, you're speaking a different language in .NET, help me to understand what the objective is. And then maybe I can help to translate that into clearer requirements or I can put some thought into what the customer journey might be. If we

use this, I honestly don't ever think I'm the smartest guy in the room. And I think if I am, I'm probably in wrong room, right? Yeah, it was a lot a lot of trust in the folks that had made that what it was.

[00:10:35] **Nichols:** So important. You can't accomplish or have any success with just one person you know it really does take many people. And I love your story about what's his official title, The Wheel Man? I love that just putting the glue on. That's amazing. I love that story. So let's segue into then what you're doing today with Panera. And you are an amazing company. We're very grateful and blessed that they're awesome client of ours. We love Panera, where I always say we're a partner and we're also a really good patron. I just had Panera yesterday. I love Panera.

[00:11:12] **Rudden:** That's one thing that we think everybody loves about Panera is anywhere you go when they find out you're from Panera, everyone says: "Oh, I love the---," whatever it is. And it's so great to hear. Someone always says something positive about Panera. They may trail off into, you know. Well, there's this, too. But there's always; it always starts with the bread or the soup or something like.

[00:11:35] **Nichols:** Mine is the autumn squash soup right now. I just. I love it. I could eat it every day. And I love Fuji Apple Salad. So speaking of, I think that's what is really cool about Panera. There's so much of life, isn't there J.C., that's focused around food? And you guys have really focused on the customer experience. And I think you even say it's like coming home. Talk a little bit about that. The homage, the bread homage at Panera. So the bread homage is something that is truly special.

[00:12:08] **Rudden:** Whenever we have a meeting, we ask someone to give a bread homage. It would be them looking back at their career, telling their story, but making those connections to bread. Right. So lots of stories about people who came from different countries and they were poor families. But they always you know, mom always found flour to be able to make fresh bread for the family. Right. Or, you know, mom's recipe or fresh rolls at Thanksgiving. The neatest ones for me are the ones where people remember Panera being on their tables. Right. They would go to Panera and they'd pick up a fresh loaf of what their favorite bread was. And that's what they would serve at their families. It's just fascinating how it seems like when you ask someone to give a bread homage, they can always tie a story back to a bread or back to the simplicity of bread. Right. A few ingredients, but makes families really come together and sit at

the table. That's the first thing that's on the table when you go to a restaurant. It's the first they give you.

[00:13:11] **Nichols:** That's the first thing they bring you, right? Well, I told you, you know, I'm from Kentucky. Greg and I are from Kentucky originally. And at our house, it was a skillet of cornbread every single night. Now, the entree may change, the vegetables may change. But we had cornbread every night with sweet tea. So and I've looked back on those memories very fondly. So we're going to take a quick break and we'll be right back with the J.C. Rudden.

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[00:14:14] **Nichols:** Let's talk a little bit more about bread when I think of bread I think of warm rolls and warmth. And I wanna talk about the culture because you guys call it the Panera warmth. And you guys really, truly have spent a lot of time on the customer experience. And when people come into a Panera, that warm feeling that they feel like they're feeling like they're coming home. And you guys have a fairly new CEO, right? Beginning April; Niren Chaudhary. Yep. From Krispy Kreme. And you said before that he was at Yum!

[00:14:47] **Rudden:** He basically ran the operations in India for Kentucky Fried Chicken, which to me is fascinating that he grew that business because I want to say 50 percent of the population is vegetarian. So for this to be pretty successful is absolutely amazing. Right?

[00:15:01] **Nichols:** Right. But I know he talks a lot about growing people. And I know that this is at the heart of what you're about too.

[00:15:09] **Rudden:** Without a doubt, right? Yes. So Niren actually recently started a family tree award where he recognizes people in the field, you know, general managers or district type managers who have grown people into different roles. So it's definitely a passion. Is that that's important to him? It's really important to me. And that's really what has been the biggest blessing for me at Panera is to have the opportunity to grow people. Right. So, we're in charge

of cafe operation services, which is a fancy word for we're a helpdesk. We are responsible for managing and maintaining and troubleshooting all of the hardware and software and things that are in our cafes. And it's very easy for your traditional help desks to be a stereotype, right? Did you reboot it? Did you turn it off and on? Right. That's your stereotypical help desk kind of stuff. We've actually taken a different approach. And what we ask our technologists to do is to imagine that the cafe manager that they're speaking to is looking at three of their loved ones. So, it's a way for us to connect our persons on the phone to the ultimate customer. Right. So, by helping this general manager with whatever technology issue they have, they're actually assisting their mother, their brother, their sister, whatever else. Right. And so, it helps to keep us grounded in what's truly important. The friction that occurs in cafes isn't just affecting that general manager or that cafe associate. It could potentially be affecting our customer. And that ultimate customer is I'm an ultimate customer. Right. I want to you know, I want to have a great experience when I go into a Panera. So am I. Right? So, when I when I want my bagel, right, I don't want to have the P.O.S. slow down. You know, we want to get in and we want to get out. It's important for us to connect ourselves back to that journey. Right. The other thing that I think has been so great about Panera is we're very intentional about thinking about that journey. So, when we're writing software, when we're creating new tools, when we implement the kiosks, for example, five or six years ago, we didn't just throw up kiosks in a café because that was the new cool thing to do. There was a lot of thought behind that, a lot of thought leadership, a lot of walking through what the customer would experience. The customer journey. Without a doubt.

[00:17:51] **Rudden:** What is it when I go into a café; what does my journey look like and then how would my journey be different? And it's so easy for people at Panera because everyone's gone there. Everyone in St. Louis has been to a St. Louis Bread Co. So what does your journey look like in St. Louis Bread Co? If I put this computer in front of you, what's the journey look like now? Does it change? Does it change for everyone? Does it change just for you? Is it better? Is it worse? There's also some times when we've been so intentional about thinking about the café's journey that we've missed, thinking about the cafe associates new journey with this technology. Right. When we put kiosks into a cafe, we're looking at the customer journey and it's going to be great. But what did it do to that kitchen staff that's now got 2 times more orders that are hitting the line. Right. So it's really helped us to even focus more on everyone's journey in a Panera from customer to cafe associate to baker. It's an intentional part of our day to day life.

[00:18:57] **Nichols:** Well you just set that up very well because now I want to talk about innovation and innovation around the customer journey and you know, I've talked about this and you guys are doing hackathons internally, I bet you there are some listeners out there that are

thinking, well, we would like to do a hackathon. How does that work? I know your hackathons have always been focused around the customer experience. So talk about how you started and give some coaching to those out there that may be going well we would like to do something like that. What does it look like?

[00:19:33] **Rudden:** The best part about our hackathon is we actually started the hackathon understanding that the people who are innovating are coders. Our customer service folks are café operators. Everyone has these amazing ideas, but they have a job to do. And so there's not a lot of opportunity for them to really be creative. Sure. Get things done. Right. So just creating the space for our associates to be creative, to sort of implement their ideas. Right. To even implement and fail just to see what can and can't be done. It was really born out of that innovation, not necessarily out of: We need to make sure we're doing things for the cafe and we need to be on the cutting edge. So again, starting there, starting with that customer, starting with that associate, really has grown into this phenomenally innovative event where we have our vendor partners involved. We've got, you know, senior developers, we've got junior developers, we've got cafe operators that all come together for new ideas. And we've implemented a number of them in our cafes and in our technology. People are excited about it, especially developers. You give a developer a design document and then they bang out code and they pass it off and then, QA go test it, right? That's the lifecycle of that developer. But to give them that creative space to really reflect back on why they started getting into coding and create something new and to do something innovative and exciting, it really energizes the team, something that makes a difference.

[00:21:10] **Nichols:** I think one of the tenets of the way that you guys have done it too, JC. is it's a cross-functional and you'd mentioned the cafe operators. It's not just the developer sitting there, it is a cross-functional team. So then the people that are closest to the customer can say to that developer, here's an idea, here's something that I see that we could do and then I can see that developer going, well, here's what we could do. Here's how we could solve that challenge. You know, make that improvement. So you guys have, what, maybe 15 teams, something like that? Or is it more than that?

[00:21:45] **Rudden:** And I think we're coming up on twenty-five teams. And is it done over a weekend? I mean how do you carve out that space? It's a weekend. So depending on how big it gets, we you know, we'll start on a Wednesday afternoon and there will be people that'll stay through the night and they'll code and they'll build and they'll design and then, you know,

Thursday or Friday, depending on how big it is, you know, in the afternoon. Everybody does their presentation.

[00:22:11] **Nichols:** Are a panel of judges?

[00:22:12] **Rudden:** Yes. So, John, Meister, of course, is. John, as you rarely see, John giddy, but this is one of those times where John's really giddy. Oh, man. It just the ideas and the things that come out of this. Right. One of the things that came out of the hackathon was Alexa voice ordering. That's something that was just recently put up on Amazon site about the new Alexa enabled headphones are coming out. So you can order Panera without ever taking anything out of your ear. Right. Drive through technology, just a number of things that have come out of that. So anyway, so John's giddy and a number of VPs...

[00:22:46] **Nichols:** Do you have outside judges as well? Absolutely. I have sidebars as well.

[00:22:50] **Rudden:** Without a doubt we have some of our vendor partners that will be on the panels. You know, a lot of our executive staff, we've brought in a number of our operators, you know, our senior operators who get to see a lot of these ideas. It's just really a wonderful event. And again, your teams get excited about that stuff. They get fired up and unbelievable ideas, things. You just you just don't have the time to think about that people come up with. It's a testament to everyone's innovation, but also how much they care about that journey. Right. And how much they really care about the customer journey, the cafe journey, making things easier on the cafe.

[00:23:26] **Nichols:** So we've already talked about growing and caring for people. But you believe that that is something extra that every leader needs, right? Is caring about people and being willing to invest.

[00:23:39] **Rudden:** Everything we've talked about starts with a person. Some of the new buzzwords we talk about A.I. and we talk about machine learning and even those things, they start with people. The hackathons, they start with people. You can energize a person by giving them opportunity more than anything else, raising their pay, giving them more benefits. You energize a person by giving them opportunity to give him those opportunities. I think as a leader, you risk losing them. So if I try to create the space for a young helpdesk person, you know, just out of college let's say, we give them opportunity to succeed. We recognize them for their success.

[00:24:20] **Rudden:** We maybe convert them to an employee and then we move them into a level 2 or a level 3 or we've created hope for that person. We've created opportunity. And at each level they continue to grow and they continue to learn on their own. We have converted or hired on average of forty-six people a year for the last five years. And for me to be able to say that I've changed the lives of that many people, it's amazing.

[00:24:49] **Nichols:** It's true. And that that's what floats your boat, isn't it, JC?

[00:24:55] **Rudden:** A thousand percent. But we have to start with being genuine. Right. It's easy for people to see through the; "Oh you only care about Panera" or "You only care about how many calls I take." For us to really, really grow people and to create that true culture of warmth that we have a Panera. You have to care genuinely about them, which means as a leader you risk losing it, right? They may find a better opportunity at another organization. **But that's okay** if I care genuinely about that person.

[00:25:23] **Nichols:** Right, them being their best self. Well, there is a risk there because you're making them more marketable as you're doing that. But listen, you know, you're creating this warmth in this culture where they're gonna want to stay, you know, hopefully.

[00:25:37] **Rudden:** And if not, hopefully they they've learned the importance of creating that space at another organization.

[00:25:43] **Nichols:** For someone else. Sure. The gift that keeps giving, that's wonderful. So, J.C., we are a baseball town, but you were involved in something called the World Baseball Marathon. What is that?

[00:25:55] **Rudden:** Put simply, it's an event that we do about every couple of years now that is fifty-four crazy individuals that play baseball for ridiculous amounts of time. So back in 2006, a friend of mine, Chuck Williams, was doing whatever he does on the internet, and he finds out that the longest baseball game ever played was 24 hours long, 24 hours straight. He says, well, we can play longer than that. So he gets a group of guys together. We've all played baseball together for years and he says, let's play baseball for 36 hours and let's see if we can raise a little money for Boys Club. So they did. And they ended up raising like \$60,000. And we're able to put a scoreboard at the Boys Club of St. Louis. A few years later, Chuck finds out that someone beat the record played longer than 36 hours, probably something like 36 hours and

five minutes. And Chuck says, well, that's unacceptable, this is St. Louis, where baseball town, we're going to do this again. So Chuck asked me if I know if I'd help out, if I'd play. Certainly. Absolutely. So, in October of 2009, we played baseball out at Rascal's in O'Fallon for 48 hours. So that's 20 guys on each team. You kind of split into two squads and you rotate in, but the game can never end. Guinness has certain rules. We ended up raising over a hundred thousand dollars for Cardinal Glennon Children's Hospital at that time. We thought we're kind of on to something. So, 2012, they didn't actually get the world record at the time because there were some paperwork issues. Guinness is pretty strict, but they raised a hundred thousand dollars for Backstoppers. 2013 we raised a hundred thousand dollars for Joplin tornado relief.

[00:27:31] **Rudden:** We've raised money for the Mighty Oaks Heart Foundation with Greg and Becky Ortel. We've raised, you know, almost a hundred thousand dollars for Mission Continues, which is a veterans advocacy organization. And then just this past May, for the first time, we got to be a part of doing something that was going to be tangible. Right. Normally, it's just raising money and it goes to the organization. Cardinal Glennon Children's Hospital and Siteman Cancer Center for Kids here in St. Louis found out about the event and approached us after our previous event and said, if you do it again, we'd like to be involved. They were building a facility at Children's Hospital for MIBG treatment. So I might have that backward, it might be MIGB, but the MIBG is a targeted treatment of radiation for neuroblastoma, which is an adolescent cancer. There isn't a facility in St. Louis, so Children's Hospital wanted to make one here in St. Louis instead of having to ship kids out, you know, to Memphis or wherever. We were kind of the tip of the spear of that project. Well, it turns out within, you know, within days or weeks, maybe it became obvious they didn't need us anymore because people were just throwing money at the projects. So now at Children's Hospital, there is an MIGB facility where kids can get their treatment. It's seven-inch inch lead lined thick rooms, the window overlooks the park. There's an anti-room where the parents can stay. It's like a hotel room and they can look in and see their kids while they're getting the treatment.

[00:29:06] **Nichols:** The seed money really came from what you guys were doing.

[00:29:11] **Rudden:** It was really more of it was really more of the effort of, hey, these guys are playing for this purpose. Did you want to join in? Right. So fifty-six guys playing baseball. I think we played for 83 hours in May, this past May. So don't ask me anytime soon if we want to do it again. You know, probably in two years we'll think of something else.

[00:29:30] **Nichols:** Very innovative. J.C., is there something that you're involved in right now that you want to talk to the listeners about and how they can get involved? I think I know what you're going to say here, which is awesome. But talk to us about that.

[00:29:47] **Rudden:** Well, to give the pitch. Honestly, I've been really excited about the TechLX more so from the perspective of it's really a community outreach opportunity to be able to embrace and lean into the fact that we in St. Louis really are a technology hub. And there are some phenomenally brilliant people working in the technology industry to be able to reach out to new companies that might consider St. Louis to be able to reach out to startups that are going to consider St. Louis an option and to be able to tell them that we have a network of people that are dedicated to sharing information, to growing people, and please come to St. Louis and you can tap into this expertise. Right. When you're talking with companies like Ameren and Panera and Mastercard and Express Scripts and Bayer, the names just keep going and going to offer that to people that want to come in and want to be a part of this city that I've loved my entire life is really just a great, unique opportunity. And I'm excited to be a part of it. I'm excited to have been asked to be a part of it. And it really does feel more like an opportunity to give back to St. Louis, to my hometown, but also to kind of be a part of that technology innovation culture that is just booming here in St. Louis.

[00:31:07] **Nichols:** So what JC's talking about is the technology leadership experience that technology partners launched in June in partnership with Ouellette & Associates out in New Hampshire. And if you want to know more about this, so this is for rising stars in organizations to be a part of this. But if you would like to be a mentor, if you'd like to know more about the TechLX, you can go to our website, technologypartners.net and click on TechLX and you can get more information on how you can get involved. But J.C., thank you so much. So JC put his hat in the ring to be a mentor for some of the participants in the program. So it doesn't work without people like you. JC, willing to invest in the next generation of leadership; tech leadership. Well, very good. This is has been so much fun having you on the show. And so thank you so much for making the time. Thank you for your partnership. And we love Panera as a client. So thank you guys for entrusting us to help you with your technology needs.

[00:32:10] **Rudden:** Certainly, really had a great time. Thanks for having me.

[00:32:12] **Announcer:** Thank you for listening to today's show. Something Extra with Lisa Nichols is a Technology Partners Production Copyright Technology Partners Inc. 2019 for show

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