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JULY 3, 2006
THE FUTURE OF TECH/Online Extra
 By Michael Orey

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Intellectual Ventures: Focus on Patents

Cofounded by a former Microsoft biggie, IV is a brainstorming session, invention breeding ground, and patent powerhouse rolled into one

Casey Tegreene stands at one end of a conference table and points to the ceiling. The microphones, he tells those assembled around the table, are so the prosecutors in other rooms can listen to the conversation. "Patent prosecutors," he hastens to add: lawyers who prepare patent applications.

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It's the start of another "invention session" at Intellectual Ventures, the company cofounded by former Microsoft ([MSFT](#)) biggie Nathan P. Myhrvold. Tegreene, the company's chief patent counsel, is addressing 10 top doctors and scientists who have come together on June 17 for one purpose: dreaming up inventions.

Intellectual Ventures, or IV, is in the invention business. Part of that involves going out and buying up existing patents, something IV has been doing aggressively for the past three years, accumulating a trove of thousands. But IV also aims to come up with its own great breakthroughs to patent, and that's what these brainstorming sessions—there have been about 70 since 2003—are all about.

ALL-STAR CAST. The focus of today's deliberations is stated about as plainly as it can be in a slide projected on the wall of the windowless room: "Things for the surgeon."

Tegreene may be the emcee of the session, or "chief cat herder," as he calls himself, but there's no doubt about who is really running the show. Myhrvold

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himself is seated front and center, and actively participates in—though does not dominate—the discussion throughout the day. Also in the room are three surgeons, a biomedical engineer, two physicists with ties to Lawrence Livermore Laboratories, and various IV staff, most of them with advanced degrees of their own.

Many critics express skepticism that you can put a bunch of smart people together in the room and think up commercially viable ideas, totally divorced from the production and marketing operations of a "real" business. But Myhrvold believes in pure invention, and particularly likes the idea of getting people from different disciplines together to solve problems, something he says the rest of the world "is terrible at."

LASHING TOGETHER PARTS. To arrive at solutions, he says, "there's a chasm that has to be bridged. We take the piece parts and lash them together." Usually the only time brain surgeons see physicists, he notes, is "if they're cutting one open."

To get things going, Tegreene has asked the surgeons in the room to fill out WIBGI statements—for Wouldn't It Be Great If.... The aim is to prime them to think about what would make the process of surgery better.

A WIBGI statement by Dr. Michael A. Smith, a chest surgeon at the University of Southern California, leads things off. Smith, dapper in a suit and cowboy boots—everyone else in the room is casual—wants to improve one of the most routine procedures: inserting an endotracheal tube which establishes an airway. He wants a better way to assure that it goes to, and stays in, the right place.

Ideas cascade forth from around the table. Lowell L. Wood Jr., from Livermore Labs, calls up an atlas of human anatomy on a laptop in front of him while an IV staffer summons a copy of an existing patent relating to endotracheal tubes on her computer and projects it on the wall. "One question is why this old patent didn't make it into the O.R.," Myhrvold says, looking at the wall.

CRAZY IDEAS. And so it goes, for more than eight hours—a half dozen or so WIBGI statements triggering dozens of ideas, some down to earth, others seeming wildly fantastical. "I just had a crazy idea, but it might just be crazy enough to work," exclaims Edward S. Boyden III, a biomechanical engineer, at one point. And while the purported focus of the day is surgery, the far-ranging discussion ends up touching on schizophrenia, malaria, and AIDS.

The atmosphere in the room is positive and encouraging. Rarely is an idea dismissed out of hand. Myhrvold himself is often the biggest cheerleader. At one point neurosurgeon Dr. Dennis J. Rivet says, in response to a problem, "So many applications jump out right away." Myhrvold practically jumps out of his seat. "Go, go, go!" he half shouts, exhorting Rivet to continue. But later, after a long discussion on one idea, Myhrvold says, "Sounds like an awful lot of effort for a fairly marginal thing."

Towards the end of the day, the group is discussing ways to destroy tumors, and projected on the wall are pictures of handheld ultrasonic devices that surgeons use for this. "Hey," says Myhrvold, who is an accomplished—and high-tech—chef, "I have one of those in my kitchen. I use it to make purees and emulsions."

Orey is a senior writer for *BusinessWeek* in New York

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