

Blue-Sky Thinking

What's the big idea? That's for Casey Tegreene to know and the rest of the world to find out

By Robin Lindley

Photography by Inye Wokoma

Casey Tegreene must have one of the best jobs on the planet. The way he sees it, he's something of a jazz conductor, jamming with some of the sharpest minds on the planet: renowned medical doctors, physicists, engineers and software specialists. Their mission? To create Intellectual Venture's (IV) one and only "product": brilliant ideas.

Founded in 2000 by ex-Microsoft brainiacs Nathan Myhrvold and Edward Jung, IV creates its own homegrown inventions and buys potentially profitable existing patents. Myhrvold has doctorates in mathematical and theoretical physics from Princeton and has worked with the legendary physicist Stephen Hawking.

Tapped by IV in 2003, the day before the firm held its first invention session, Tegreene, 49, says he's the company's "chief cat herder." His official title is vice president and chief patent counsel. He's also an inventor himself, holding dozens of patents. Before law school, Tegreene earned a master's degree in electrical engineering, then worked as a research engineer at Motorola.

After graduating from law school at New York University, Tegreene worked on Wall Street at the historic firm Cravath Swaine & Moore, specializing in complex corporate transactions. But he missed the thrill of technology, so in 1993 he came to the Northwest to work in intellectual property law, landing in 1997 at Microvision Inc. as intellectual property counsel and chief technology officer before moving on to IV.

Tegreene has 19-year-old twin daughters and a 22-year-old son. He and his wife, Kathy, have two dogs, BB and Lucille, named for BB King and the blues legend's famed guitar.

Tegreene recently told *L&P* what it's like to walk in his shoes.

L&P: What's your role in this unique enterprise?

Casey Tegreene: I run the Invention and Patent Project with inventors from all over the world. We build a structure where they can

collaborate and invent and create really cool ideas that we can then evaluate, and determine which ones are appropriate for patenting.

L&P: Your job is much different than a general counsel, then?

CT: Yes. We have a general counsel, but I'm more the senior partner at a patent law firm plus the manager of operations. There's no perfect analogy, because no one does what we do. We look like a mixture of a patent law firm, a think tank, a corporation and a bunch of people doing blue-sky thinking.

L&P: Did you envision a career in patent law during law school?

CT: I didn't think I was going into patent law. Even my summer internships were with corporate litigation and general practice firms. Only a few years after law school did I realize that, if you're doing deals, you're not doing technology.

L&P: How did you come to IV?

CT: I wasn't looking for a job, but I met with Nathan [Myhrvold], and 24 hours later I had a job offer. I like to build technology portfolios, and this was a chance to do it with some of the most creative, interesting people around in a place where they appreciate the IP and the technologies, with a chance to start some things from the beginning. [When] I showed up ... we were in a former body shop. The next day, we had a bunch of inventors over and did [our first] invention session. We quickly realized we had the ability to generate lots of new ideas—more than I had anticipated.

L&P: What exactly is an "invention session"?

CT: It's like brainstorming. ... We find areas that would be interesting for us to pursue. Then we do homework on the area: What are the interesting problems? Who are the interesting people? What are the latest developments? Then we go to our bench of inventors. For example, we may

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—Tegreene

ask surgeons to give us some problems we call "WIGS" [Wouldn't It be Greats]. Wouldn't it be great if I had X? ... We focus on promising, lucrative and interesting problems to solve. I try to manage the people as they wander around various technologies, to maintain some thread that makes sense. Given that the inventors [are] eclectic and have a lot of curiosity, we tend to wander through a lot of areas. We might start talking about nanotechnology and end up on preventing injury among the active elderly population. Unlike most product companies, we are not constrained by particular problems. We're actually looking for good, big problems to solve. It's a bit like a jazz session. Things come and go, ebb and flow.

L&P: Are there rules for these "jazz sessions"?

CT: Using the jazz metaphor, [I'm] the jazz leader [of] different people: some ... flights-of-fancy types, who create outside-of-the-box ideas, and some are methodical and linear and fill in the blanks, and some are the counter-beat, the skeptics. My role is somewhere between facilitator, disciplinarian, patent lawyer and hall monitor.

L&P: How do you select people for the sessions?

CT: You need some people who are more creative and perhaps not as disciplined, some who are rhythmic, some who are more structured. For example, if everyone's a surgeon, they've all seen the problem the same way. You bring into that a software architect, a physicist and a biochemist. The ability to look at [a problem] from a different point of view is often where creativity happens.



Casey Tegreene knows the formula to success.

L&P: It must be challenging to deal with the egos of the foremost scientists and technology experts in the world.

CT: It turns out that the people who are creative and curious are good at listening, too. The people do this because they want to get the ideas of other people on problems.

L&P: You're using renowned international experts as inventors, right?

CT: They tend to be those people, but they tend to be eclectic technologically or otherwise ... Pretty much everyone tends to be curious in a lot of other areas. They're a mile deep and a mile wide.

L&P: Speaking of remarkable people, is there anyone in the history books you wish you could meet?

CT: Leonardo da Vinci. He had infinite interests and there are still lots of mysteries about him.

L&P: Looking into your own future, where do you see yourself in 20 years?

CT: Still looking for interesting things to do, but no idea where. I grew up in the Caribbean, so that's one possibility ... There's a book called *1,000 Things to Do Before You Die*, so hopefully I'll have a chunk of these 1,000 things done.

L&P: What do you do to unwind?

CT: Ultimate Frisbee, water-ski, hike, kayak, travel. I'm remodeling a 1911 historic house.

L&P: Where have some of your travels taken you?

CT: I've surfed in Bali, climbed the volcano in Java at 3 in the morning to watch the sunrise come up, scuba-dived in the Cayman Wall, hiked the Inca Trail.

L&P: Your life sounds pretty amazing. Do you ever feel like a superhero?

CT: Not a superhero ... more a Curious George.

L&P: Back to the office. Are the invention sessions the most exciting part of your work?

CT: If you're into technical challenge and eclectic technology, it's great, but most other people would probably not like my job. At the end of one or two days of a session, it's difficult to function, because it's like taking medical boards and technical boards and the SAT and LSAT, where the people are all highly intelligent, and you try to follow many threads of discussion in many directions. You have to accept lots of information [and] be willing to keep perpetually curious to work here ... It's a lot of fun to me.

L&P: The hard work must be deciding which ideas to patent.

CT: We distill the core ideas from the session, then do some homework on those ideas—have they been done and do we have all the information we need to evaluate them? Then the inventors

rank ideas. We've developed software that [puts] each category of invention into a stack ranking and handles all the disclosures and organizes them. The ones that percolate to the top are the ones we actually file. We've gone from two people to over 60, and from not existing to filing over 500 patent applications a year.

L&P: What inventions did you find particularly fascinating?

CT: There are ones I think are interesting, and other people don't always have the same opinion, but that's useful. We've done things to help the active elderly when they fall. We filed on emerging technologies like metamaterials [manmade composites with properties not readily observed in nature], which was for the nerd physicist and has become a major deal. A couple of our inventors in their non-IV work won the Descartes Prize for [their work on an] invisibility cloak.

L&P: What advice do you have for aspiring inventors?

CT: Be curious and look into everything that interests them. The normal way that people look at things is not always the right way. **L&P**

Robin Lindley is a Seattle attorney and writer. He is a former chair of the WSBA's World Peace through Law Section, and has a background as an attorney with public agencies and Congress, and as a law teacher.