

## Engaging in the Innovation Ecosystem – Virtually!

A completely virtual startup accelerator. This would not have been imaginable until March 2020 when COVID-19 began spreading rapidly and new phrases such as “social distancing” and “fashionable face mask” were introduced. The whole world had to pivot, including MassChallenge Boston, a startup accelerator traditionally hosted in their Boston Seaport location, where access to resources and hardware attracts the best startups. These accelerators allow MITRE to engage with startups to find potential solutions for government needs.

Traditionally, MITRE has engaged with the startups in person. Making the trip into Boston, braving the traffic-laden roads or trains packed with commuters, to support the accelerator program as mentors. MITRE even has an Innovation Outpost in the MassChallenge Boston office, a small space for our staff to touchdown and work so we are truly immersed into the community. But all that had to change when shifting from in-person to fully online engagements.

From March to May, MITRE employees joined over 500 judges to evaluate thousands of applications and selected 100 early-age startups. Being virtual meant that new challenges were posed each day, but it also meant there could be more judges than before, and from the comfort of their own home. MassChallenge leveraged their existing platform and moved all of their accelerator programming online. In June, MassChallenge Boston [officially kicked off](#) its completely virtual 4-month accelerator program.

[MITRE’s Bridging Innovation](#) team quickly learned that we needed to improve how we support accelerator programs and startups when we don't have an immersed presence. But there were also benefits. Without having the physical location as a constraint, more people were able to engage with the startups, and we were able to involve MITRE employees from various locations across the company including DC, California, Colorado, Ohio, Texas, and Virginia.

For Presser Surveillance Solutions and Technologies (PSST), this proved to be very beneficial. Steven Presser, founder of PSST, led a demo of his technology that was advertised across many work programs. Subject matter experts from different sites were able to attend and hear about the solution space. The experts quickly assessed his technology and gave feedback to Presser about general ways the technology could benefit the government. From this meeting, Presser was introduced to sponsors in the Department of Justice.

This was not the only startup that benefitted from this virtual environment. GEOSTORM, SpotlightAI, and Kura AR were also introduced to subject matter experts from across MITRE as the Bridging Innovation team arranged virtual meetings and demos for a deeper understanding of their innovative solutions. For Kura AR, in particular, this proved to be very advantageous. The MITRE AR/VR Futures Lab met with tech leads from Kura AR, saw a recorded demo and discussed the game-changing features of their augmented reality headset. MITRE researchers are now exploring a collaborative effort that will allow them to evaluate the headsets in our labs with various government use cases.

Rob Gustafson, Lead Software Systems Engineer and core member of the AR/VR Futures Lab, says, “It is important to get hands on time with the technologies to create small representative

demonstrations to bring to our sponsors, while gaining a deeper understanding of what makes these new solutions different from their predecessors. The feedback from our developers and the sponsors can help improve the product.” Kura AR was chosen as a [Top 20 Startup Finalist](#) from the 2020 Boston cohort. Gustafson added, “the Kura augmented reality headset promises better performance in bright outdoor conditions and wider field of view than current commercial hardware. The AR/VR Futures Lab often demonstrates with multi-headset-vendor deployments to help show the value of different approaches with different tradeoffs on price, ergonomics, performance, etc.”

The AR/VR Futures Lab is also working with Pison, a startup from the MassChallenge Boston 2019 cohort and a \$50K Gold Winner. The company develops wearable devices that use biopotentials on the surface of the skin as input enabling intuitive and powerful gesture control of smartglasses and robotics. Vertically integrated solutions combine hardware, software, machine learning, and user interface for AR industries. Gustafson mentioned, “We have looked at this field before for user input in augmented reality without needing physical controller buttons or needing to hold your hands in a particular way to be visible to a tracking camera. We want to work with sponsors to add a Pison option to existing AR interfaces to see if it is a good fit.”

The past successes of MITRE’s engagements in the innovation ecosystems have relied on having a local presence – immersing our team in innovation programs and initially building relationships with startups face-to-face. The pandemic has dramatically changed accelerators, incubators, and co-working spaces. MITRE has been challenged to engage differently which has created opportunities for more of our engineers to get involved. Now, the right expertise from across the company can be tapped as resources, thus increasing awareness of these innovations across our research, work programs, and government sponsors. *Virtually ...* creating better engagements and outcomes.

To get involved with MITRE’s Bridging Innovation team and engage with startups in accelerator programs like MassChallenge Boston, please contact Hannah Roth at [hroth@mitre.org](mailto:hroth@mitre.org)