As part of the Café Insights series of interviews with insightful speakers, The Insight Bureau recently caught-up with Chris Colbert, former head of Harvard Innovation Labs, and speaker, writer and author of on the innovation. His upcoming book -- and the name of one of his speeches -- is entitled "Technology is Dead". So I was intrigued to ask Chris what he really means when he says this, and what it really takes for innovation to be successful. The answer is all about remembering to put the *humanity* back into technology*.*

Andrew Vine	Hello and welcome to another in the series of Café Insights. I'm Andrew Vine, CEO of The Insight Bureau, and today, I'm in conversation with Chris Colbert. How are you doing?
Chris Colbert	I'm doing great. How are you?
AV	All the way from Boston ...
CC	… all the way!
AV	Well, Chris is here because of Singapore Fintech Festival which is going on this week, and a few other things we've been working on together. But until recently, Chris, you've been the Managing Director of Harvard Innovation Labs. So, tell us a little bit about that; what goes on in an Innovation Lab?
CC	It is effectively, an incubator for Harvard students and Harvard alumni, startups from all 12 schools. I think that's the thing that makes it magical, that it represents all 12 of the schools that make up Harvard; you've got Harvard Business School, the design school, government, education, law, medical, public health, so on and so forth. And it's that diversity of student and diversity of perspective that I believe is one of the sorts of critical factors in driving successful innovation, that you can't solve complicated problems with singular points of view. So, it's an incubator with, as I said, student and alumni startups. Over the course of the four years I worked there, we probably had 1,000 teams come through.
AV	Wow, that's a lot.
CC	Yes, it's a sizeable operation.
AV	And so, you've left now, and of course you still speak, write and advise around innovation. You call yourself an "innovation catalyst" -- or I saw it written somewhere — and I thought it was a pretty cool term, actually, because that's what you do, help people to make sense of what innovation really is. And it's not always a successful story is it?
CC	No, it's not always a successful story! And I think the other funny thing about the word 'innovation' is this it's not a new phenomenon; we've been innovating ever since the cave men figured out how to control fire! I think what's different in today's world, and the reason why it's such a focal point for so many organizations and even individuals, is that the pace of change is now significantly

faster than what it used to be. And so, everybody, either consciously or subconsciously, is realizing we better innovate faster. We better change faster. We better adapt more--

AV   Or die, right?

CC   … or die! I think the problem / opportunity in the innovation space -- and this is a statistic that I share in virtually every talk I give and it blows people away, and it's actually three statistics -- 75% of start-ups fail; 84% of business transformation efforts fail; and 95% of corporate innovation fails.

AV   Wow.

CC   The good news is, everybody is understanding that it's 'innovate or die' but the bad news is they're not innovating successfully! which means they're going to die. Whether the die is a startup or a big a company, whatever, most innovation fails. And so, when I, as an innovation catalyst-- I mean, I could argue I'm less a catalyst and more a clarifier. I'm trying to help people and companies and countries, increasingly I'm talking to countries about how to mitigate the likelihood of failure

AV   I've heard you speak a couple times now, but the common theme that you're talking about is; don't forget it's actually about *humans*.

CC   I think the ability to sort of solve *any* problem is very much predicated on understanding both who *they* are, and who *you* are, in order to create in a way that fits them. And I think the funny thing about our reluctance to study the human -- the customer, the employee, the significant other -- is really pretty profound, because I think we're afraid to see the truth of our messiness. We're afraid to accept that we're actually fairly complicated creatures, and that getting the other person to buy whatever it is you're selling, or creating, or innovating, is actually hard! And so instead of looking at that head-on, we actually push it to the side, as if we're going to pretend that the human isn't part of this equation, and we're going to believe that, if we build it then they will come. If we invent the app, we create the thing -- whatever it is -- they will buy it. And what you see from the failure rates is that it doesn't usually end that way.

AV   Well, you have a presentation that you very provocatively call "Technology is Dead" In fact, that's the new topic for your book, right?

CC   Yes

AV   But what does that mean, when you say technology is dead?

CC   So, my whole point -- and the punchline of the talk, which will probably be the punchline of the book, is really two-fold; the first is, if you want your technological innovation to be successful, well first understand that technology is "inanimate", right? It's effectively dead! And the only way it -- whatever it is, a function, a technology, an infrastructure, an application, an API … I don't care, whatever it is -- the only way it creates value, the only way it comes "alive" is when it is connected to the truth of the human. The thing is just a thing. It's inanimate. It's just sitting there doing nothing, of no value to anybody … until the anybody connects with it! And so that's part one.

And then the second punchline is that technology, when it does come alive, often times has unintended consequences that come with it. And what I write about, and what I speak about, is the importance of people -- all of us -- taking responsibility for better understanding the downstream consequences of some of these innovations that are happening in our world today. And they are very real and very serious. One of the examples that I use, which I just read last week, is that there are now remedial programs -- effectively halfway houses -- for video gamers to learn or re-learn social skills, to actually learn how to talk to another human being! I don't think that's okay. So anyway, that's the point.

AV   And much of your thinking can be applied to, well, really a bit of a framework for, thinking about really big challenges that we face in the world.

CC   Absolutely.

AV   When you were in Korea and you were in Argentina and other places where they were really wanted to tap into what was the innovative process that works.

CC   Right. I'll give you one example of how I think the human factor and the importance of decoding human in order to write the right innovation code is essential, is this issue of climate change. So, we all talk about climate change. We read about climate change. We theoretically care about climate change, at least those that believe in climate change. But if you examine our behaviors, we're actually not doing anything about climate change.

AV   We're not doing much …

CC   And so, we've got to bring the behaviors into the center of the climate change education, communication and even policy equation to begin to actually solve it. If we don't change our *behaviors*, we know what the outcome is. The other thing I would say about the sort of methodology is -- and when I was in Korea, I talked with the Seoul metropolitan government about this -- one of the biggest things that gets in our way is our predilections and our biases. And I said this when I was in Argentina to a group of business leaders. I looked at them and I said, "Everybody in this room …" there's 1,000 of them .. "everybody in this room thinks you're right. There's nobody sitting here that thinks you're wrong." And that's a problem; when you go to innovate against particularly complex problems, you have to suspend belief. You have to suspend biases. You have to try to look at it in the purest sense possible, which is brutally hard for humans.

AV   Yes, I bet ..

CC   We have so many biases. I read recently there's 147 biases within us, cognitive being the big one. But the other thing I would say is assembling diverse perspectives-- this goes back to the Harvard Innovation Lab. Two lawyers solving a problem might be able to solve a problem, but if the problem's really complicated, I bet you a lawyer and a doctor and an engineer and an artist and somebody from Korea and Singapore and Nairobi and Denmark, the diverse

team will always out-perform the more monochromatic team. The problem is we don't want to be in a room with people that aren't like us. So, we assemble …

AV … people like ourselves!

CC … people like us! And I think this also contributes to the innovation failure rate, that the team assigned, tasked with solving the problem just, fundamentally, isn't the right team.

AV Well, you're here at FinTech Festival this week.

CC Yep, and then I'm moderating a panel tomorrow.

AV Cool. Well, it was really nice to see you. Thank you very much

CC Nice to see you. Really fun

AV Thanks

Chris Colbert is an international speaker, innovation catalyst and an author who provides unique insights into innovation, technology and human behavior which inspire audiences and organisations to action. As the former head of Harvard Innovation Labs, Chris Colbert understands that the pace of change in the world is now faster than the natural pace of most organizations and people. Chris presents to large conferences, client forums and to corporate meetings. He delivers his insights about technology, innovation and humanity through various presentations, offering different thinking and practical, applicable guidance on how to create a culture of innovation and realise the myriad of positive consequences it will yield.