RICHARD TUBB'S
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CompTIA

Join Richard at the CompTIA EMEA Conference

This episode is a series of live interviews done at the CompTIA EMEA (Computing Technology Industry Association) (European, Middle Eastern and Asian) Conference in London. For those of you who don't know, CompTIA are known for their certification programmes, but they're a not-for-profit trade association and a peer community.

This conference is the biggest outside of the States, and 500 IT businesses, Managed Service Providers (MSPs) and others in the industry get together to learn and collaborate with each other.

This is not an advert for CompTIA – I'm just a huge fan of what they do! I think it's a no-brainer for IT companies to be involved in the organisation, and the most successful businesses I come across are heavily involved in peer collaboration. It's easier to do things as part of a collective rather than plough your own furrow.

Bruce Penson – Managing Director at Pro Drive IT (CompTIA Member)
RT: Tell us about Pro Drive IT?

BP: We are an MSP based in Guildford, and work with small to medium sized companies who value the business side of the consulting services we provide. I don't have tech

experience – I have a sales background – and I believe that we're primarily a business adviser, and look for clients who buy in that to that.

RT: Am I right in thinking you specifically target regulated industries, such as the oil and gas markets?

BP: That's right. We also target financial advisers, commodity traders or businesses who *support* clients in regulated industries.

RT: What specific challenges do you have working with clients in regulated industries? They must have the bar set pretty high for what they need you to do as their IT provider?

BP: They have a lot of compliance concerns, whether that's regulations from trade bodies, corporate governance or something that their clients request from them. There's a whole lot of technology-related issues that come with that, but their biggest problem is understanding how to deal with it and how it works.

RT: What are they looking for from MSPs who might be able to support them, particularly when you first make contact?

BP: The conversations usually come about because the company has problem, which tends to be something that's holding their business back, such as a regulation they're not compliant with or a client request.

A good example is a market research company that we worked with a last year which moved into supporting the banking sector. Whenever they pitched for work, they were asked to show that they were compliant with IT security requirements, and they didn't know if they were.
This was holding their business back and they had to do something about it, so they came to us. We had to demonstrate that we had the ability to help them, which we usually do through a 'discovery workshop' to uncover all their business pains and help them relate it to the technology.

Then, we come up with a package of services which can help to address their needs. When we match up what we do with the pain points they have, it's much easier for them to see the links between them.

RT: That sounds like a strong methodology. What about tools you use? Is there anything specific you use which can give people an idea of how you've made the business so organised and successful?

BP: There's nothing that we use that other businesses aren't already using, I think it's about the way we use them. We're open with our prospects and customers about the tools we'll bringing in early on.

We use documentation tools, such as SharePoint and IT Glue, as many other IT companies do. We're very big on getting documentation right and making that visible to our clients. The way we present that and link it to a client's existing problems is how we differ.

RT: A lot of MSPs have a challenge when they're invited into a company to solve a pain - when that goes away the business then wonders what they're paying for. How do you overcome that?

BP: You have to relate it back to your initial discussions and continue to bring them up at review meetings – we hold ours quarterly and call them 'business reviews'. We're constantly looking for new areas of their business where we can help them, and keeping the conversation on that level.

RT: Pro Drive IT have been a member of CompTIA for a while now. What do you get out of these sessions and what's the benefit of attending the conferences?

BP: For me, it's the networking. It's about finding out what other IT services businesses are doing, their successes and challenges and exchanging war stories. We're all doing things well and we're forward-thinking businesses, but there'll always be someone who's doing something better than we are, or we're doing something well, and it's to the benefit of all the businesses to exchange stories and tips.

There are some great presentations, but the opportunity to learn from each other means we'll all do business better.

Craig Sharp of Abussi (CompTIA Conference Speaker and Member)
RT: Craig, you're the Managing Director of Abussi are outsourced IT support providers covering Birmingham and the West Midlands. You spoke today on 'What do people think of Managed Service Providers?' Can you tell the listeners a bit about that?
CS: I think they key is that it depends in what space you exist - for Abussi, we have sub-25-user businesses. MSP is a term that's not well understood, so you have to explain that to the client or accept that 'the IT support team' is the name that you'll be given to explain what it is you do.

RT: I don't think clients ever use the term 'Managed Service Providers.' How do you think they actually see MSPs?

CS: Once they understand that an MSP is a kind of IT support company *plus*, or enhanced, they see it as a way to offload more of the tech stuff to those people. Maybe they initially saw you as providing hardware support, but over time they realise you also deal with infrastructure, internet, security, anti-virus, printers, VoIP and much more.

MSPs should be selling their service on the basis that it's a great opportunity for their clients to offload responsibility and let them manage the day to day stuff, rather than the client to face the peril themselves.

RT: Over the past few years, Abussi have been at the vanguard of cloud computing, moving away from standard on-site solutions and to cloud solutions. How has that changed your relationship with your clients?

CS: At my level and in our space, I don't think clients have really changed their attitude. They still have email and other IT-related services that need to be managed, but there's less equipment – fewer servers, desktop PCs and hardware, and there's more 'bring your own device', such as iPads.

What we do is advise the client about the services they need, which these days usually is a cloud-based solution. It brings cost value, and also because most of them have built-in disaster recovery services.

Cloud services means we can bring more value to the customer, but you have to explain that to the customer, because they won't understand it. They need to know that they still need IT people to manage everything and explain how it all works, but it frees up their time to give better services themselves.

RT: If there were three pieces of advice that you could give to fellow MSPs who were aspiring to be a company like Abussi, with a great reputation and good client base, what would they be?

CS: Firstly, if you occupy a similar space to us (sub-25-users), then you need to build relationships. If you drop the ball with a client, having a good relationship allows you to fix your mistakes without losing them.

Two, look at every part of the service you provide and standardise and simplify as much as you can. This will give you fewer technical headaches and make things easier to manage. Thirdly, bring to the customer solutions that work for *them.* Don't make it all about technology and talk about gigabytes and megabytes, because they don't care.

Instead, make it about things like helping them work remotely or from home, or on a mobile device, so they don't have to be chained to a desk or chair. Think about the customer and what would benefit them, not technical solutions you find exciting.

Mark Williams - Pensar (Outgoing Chair of the CompTIA Channel Community)
RT: Can you explain what the Channel Community is?

MW: The Channel Community is a mixed group of solution providers, vendors and distributors, predominantly based in the UK. It's a networking opportunity and also allows us to give best practise advice, deliver workshops and generally improve the quality of service delivery in the UK.

RT: Previously, you served on the Executive Council, and you've also been the Chair. What do you get out of that role?

MW: It's been very rewarding. I've been able to network with people I may not have otherwise met. I've been introduced to new vendors, so we've looked at new products and services which otherwise may not have come to the fore.

I've worked with other solution providers, and I'm a great believer in collaboration rather than competition. You can't be all things to all men, so it's important to build relationships and find outsourcing arrangements in order to deliver a full range of services.

RT: From the point of view of some IT companies are insular and have never collaborated before, they may be thinking: "Why on earth would I share my trade secrets with people are my competitors?" What would you say to them?

MW: Realise what you're good at, focus on your strengths and do them really well, then look to outsource for the areas where you may be weaker. Everyone has specialisms they can offer the market, but sometimes companies wrongly position themselves as a one-stop resource for their clients. If you want to deliver that, you have to partner with others.

RT: So, it's about building strategic alliances with others?

MW: Yes, it's finding someone to provide any ancillary service that you don't offer. It could be database admin, which isn't usually a core skill within MSPs. Whatever you need to procure for your clients but can't do yourself.

The benefit of procuring through the CompTIA Community is that most of the companies that come along are engaged with the idea of building their business. They want to improve and follow best practises, so if you engage with another member you can be assured that they'll deliver good service.

RT: The early days of CompTIA were meetings of 20 people in a room in Birmingham. How has it grown to what you have today – 500 attendees at a conference?

MW: It's been a terrific progression, and that's down to some key members who were there at the beginning. They saw the germination of the idea, stuck with it, came to all the events and contributed to the feedback.

Successive meetings have more attendees, and the responses afterwards show that we're constantly improving. We've got a 90% satisfaction rating, and word gets around so more people come along.

RT: For anyone who's never attended a CompTIA Channel meeting, what could an IT provider expect at their first visit?

MW: They can expect to meet some really friendly people. Some of the delegates today are first-time attendees, and they've said they're surprised by how friendly everybody is and how willing they are to help. This goes back to the theme of collaboration not competition – regular attendees appreciate that.

When you come for the first time, you should do lots of networking, meet people, speak to vendors, look at the new products and services and keep abreast of the latest developments. This is a great forum for doing all of that.

RT: This is your last meeting as Chair, and you're stepping down after two years. Let me thank you for everything you've done to grow this event and increasing the engagement.

For anyone who wants to find out about the CompTIA, where should they go?

MW: On the CompTIA website they can drill down in the menu of communities, where they'll find the UK Channel Community. They can engage with me and I'll put them in touch with the right people. It's a very low-cost entry, and you'll get your money back in no time at all.

Todd Thibodeaux (CEO of CompTIA Worldwide)
RT: Can you tell us a bit about CompTIA and your role within it?

TT: I'm the President and CEO of CompTIA, which is a global non-profit and helps IT to be better businesses, to grow, meet other people, learn best practises, and provide research and learning opportunities. People probably know us best for our IT certification programmes – A+ is probably the best known one.

RT: In your opening conference address, you said that the A+ is being reborn?

TT: The exams are changed every three years, and it's time for some updating. A lot has happened in the last three years – cloud has become a bigger part of an IT technician's day to day job, cyber security, mobile devices and new operating systems have also become more important.
RT: I started out my career with the A+ many years ago. Does that mean that everything I learned is irrelevant now?

TT: You'd be surprised by how much is still relevant. There is a lot of legacy equipment out there, and people need to know about things like parallel ports and Scuzzy, or Quick Basic – some point of sales terminals still use those.

We try to keep the legacy embedded and get rid of it only when it's definitely no longer relevant, but we introduce new technology at the same time. There are two exams, so we break it into two sections.

RT: We're at the CompTIA EMEA conference, where there are 500 delegates. Some are from education, but others are IT business owners. You've said that the organisation is best known for its educational offerings, but can you tell us more about the research and community aspects?

TT: The certification programmes are primarily our revenue source to do all the other great stuff we do. We have 2,200 members globally and about 360 in the UK. They range from

really small companies with one or two employees, all the way up to the big businesses such as Cisco, Intel and Microsoft.

In between, we have companies of all sizes and scale, so we try to bring together communities of folks around business practises and geography, and they help to define the issues and challenges the industry is facing.

It's our job to create tools and facilitate ways to overcome those challenges to be more effective in their business. We carry out research on a global basis, and that helps inform businesses about standard best practises and trends.

We also lobby on behalf of the industry, and increasingly we're being asked to do work on lobbying the UK government. We work in workforce a lot, to ensure we get a good pipeline of talent into the industry.

The area we're most proud of is our philanthropic work – we do a lot of charitable activities. We had a presentation about one of our UK programmes, TeenTech, which helps kids get into tech and IT. That's a big issue, because we're trying to get more people into the industry.

RT: Most of my podcast audience are IT business owners. For any of those who are just becoming aware of CompTIA, what would you say is the compelling reason for them to visit the website?

TT: It's really about best practises and the chance to talk with others operating in the space. If you're a new business and you haven't developed a good network of people facing the same challenges, or you're only associating with other start-ups, you have the opportunity to interact with established businesses who know how to survive good times and bad and learn from them.
We have a range of tools you can utilise online, including webinars and how-to guides. We have a rich library of helpful information, and the cost of membership is minimal. We try to keep the cost low to get in as many people as possible.

In the end, the ultimate value comes from the networking and the ability to interact with others who are facing the same challenges.

RT: How can people find out more?

TT: The website is split into two – the certification or the membership, and we ask a simple question to help people work out where they want to be. They can find all our resources and tools, and we have an open membership which allows anybody who comes to the site to sign up and access 60% of the resources for free.

They can download white papers, look at research and some educational resources, and if they like what they see they can sign up and be part of the family. Once people are in, they tend to stay, because they see the value.

RT: I know you're a fan of home automation, as I am. What are the latest gadgets you've invested in?

TT: I've put up a Nest and installed the smoke alarms. It's an interesting play for Google to produce sensing devices for the home, because you may be discussing holidays in Turkey, and then Google does pre-emptive searches and suggests you book a holiday.

I've got a couple of dogs, and I've been tempted to install cameras to monitor them while I'm travelling, as I'm away a lot. There's a lot going on in home automation, and Apple will be getting into it in a big way. It's good to see it become mainstream, because previously it's required intensive DIY. I think we'll see a lot more for home security as well.