Mostyn Thomas runs Astrix IT Support, a pure-plan MSP (managed service provider) in Wales. He started off in the education sector, selling contracts to schools and local authorities, providing them with managed services, before focusing solely on businesses.

RT: Tell us about Astrix and how you got started as an MSP?

MT: I started out providing services to schools, which led to providing services for business, specifically break/fix with some managed services. As the market has changed, the company has developed too, to only providing full managed services to businesses. We either charge a monthly or per user fee, and then give them a varied level of service based on their needs.

RT: How long has the business been running, and when did you move from break/fix to managed services?

MT: The business has been running for 15 years, and unusually we started out as an MSP, drifted into break/fix five years after starting, and then moved back to MSP provision because of our experiences in education.

We started to focus fully on MSP seven or eight years ago, and in the last five years have transitioned our break/fix clients to the MSP model, or let them go so they can find another provider.

RT: What's your definition of an MSP?

MT: There's a wide-ranging definition to that, and it means different things to people. For us, we charge a monthly fee and the customer and technicians understand what they're paying for, so we don't have to hit them with big bills or unexpected costs, which is what happens in the break/fix world.

Pure MSP is probably 'so much per user, per month' and we do have some clients like that, but most of our client base and our location restricts us from doing only that. It's where we'd like to be, because it's clear for both sides and makes business planning easier.

We're hybrid to an extent, but moving towards a full model and exploring the idea of adding hardware in too, so that customers pay one price for everything and guarantees quality from end to end.

RT: You mentioned that things are slightly different in your part of the world. You have vast knowledge of how MSPs work across the UK, Europe and worldwide, so how would you define the Welsh market, and what's the difference between where you are and the rest of the UK?

MT: The Welsh market is somewhat separated from the UK, which I think is cultural. Although Welsh businesses will buy from companies elsewhere in the world, there's an appetite to buy from local people. I think that happens across the country, but I think it's particularly strong in Wales and Scotland.

Also, South Wales is very much small-business-land – there's very little large industry anymore so there aren't big employers available. You have to tailor your business to who's in your location, or move.

Whilst it's still profitable and there's good business to be done, it's different to what MSPs experience in different parts of the country where they might have three or four large clients paying them a lot of money, because we just don't have that.

RT: How does that change your mindset? When you learn something from others in the industry, how do you tailor that for your local market?

MT: We have to be careful with equipment, because while in some companies they may invest a large sum on a flat screen and a high-end laptop, in our area they're just not going to do that. We might sell one or two, but it's unlikely.

The same is true of the service, when you're trying to sell something at the top end of that managed service provision and you visit a company with ten or 15 people, they won't buy that offering, so you need to tailor things to them.

And the same applies to disaster recovery and how quickly you get them back up and running. You can't always sell the Rolls Royce, although they will see the value of the services. It doesn't mean you're any less profitable, it's just different.

RT: Let's dig a bit deeper into Astrix Systems. How many members of staff do you have and what tools do you use?

MT: We're a small team of six, and the business is very much engineering-led. I'm the sales resource, management and bottle washer! I've got an amazing team of technicians who do a great job and look after the customers. I don't need a business development manager because of their customer service skills.

I pay the technicians well, particularly from the local area, I expect a lot of them and they deliver it. When I speak to them, they tell me they enjoy the challenge and the fact that it's not an everyday job. We rarely lose any staff, which I hope is a good sign!

We use tools to make us more efficient and to leverage our position. We might only have five technical staff, but I like to think they work like 10 staff. We use a lot of monitoring and outsourced services.

We heavily use Continuum, which is an end to end service with great monitoring, so we have excellent visibility of problems as or before they happen. We also use their outsourced operations centre, which means we have access to 750 like-minded technicians 24/7.

You can't just operate in that way as you need bodies on the ground and people to answer the phone as Astrix, but it makes you much bigger, not just feel bigger. You can handle large jobs and complicated tasks you might only get asked to do once every six months, because they have guys who do them all the time. We also use a number of other monitoring tools, to track things like wireless connections.

We use the Ubiquity service which allows us to monitor many hundreds of wireless services which we host our own servers in our data centre. We can get statistics on what's up and down, what's working or needs updating. These tools help us make our five engineers seem like 10 engineers.

RT: What about a professional services automation (PSA) tool? Do you use one?

MT: Of course. We use Autotask, and have been since they first came to the UK, which I think was around 2010. We were early adopters, and got a great deal from t
The Network Group. Their service is very comprehensive, and I probably don't use all of what's included, but I use about 75% of it.

For me, as the sole manager, it's great to see how efficient we are, how well we're hitting our targets and SLAs, and I can respond quickly to customers with issues. I can even see problems arising as the engineers attend to them, so it's a key part of our business. Autotask and Continuum integrate well together, and generate their own tickets so I can see how efficient they're being for us as well.

RT: You mentioned The Network Group, and I'd like to ask about your peer collaboration. I was intrigued though by your response to my question about a PSA tool – you said 'of course' as if you'd be crazy not to. Can you tell the listeners who don't use a PSA tool why they should?

MT: I would find it difficult to keep a handle on all the flows and feeds of information and make sense of them. You could use a spreadsheet and a basic ticketing system, which is perfectly possible, but for today's customers, even if they're a small business, they're demanding quality.

They want information on what you're actually doing, and then they're happy to pay your fee. You need to be able to demonstrate what you're doing for them, and with more remote work and proactive fixing, you spend less time having to make on-site repairs, so you need to show what you're doing.

It's a way to show that you care and you're looking after their systems and reports can be easily generated and customised to demonstrate that, because all the information you need is right there. There are many aspects to it, but the most important thing is to make sense of the huge amount of information you have there. It allows you to track the engineer's work, how efficient the company has been, and give people detailed quotes.

RT: Of course, a PSA tool is only as good as the information you put into it. How good are your engineers are at logging and updating tickets, and tracking their time in the system?

MT: I know what you're getting at, and I've had many conversations around this. I've got to be honest, and as I said before, they are great engineers and business development people. We have a lot of training sessions so they understand that the PSA is not for me to keep track of them but it's so we can record everything to show which customers are profitable and which aren't.

Unprofitable customers mean we can't pay the wages, so it's self-preservation to a large extent, which they understand. Some organisations have a culture where things are either not reported or over-reported, but I like to think that Astrix have instilled a culture where that doesn't happen.

The job of the business owner is to sanitise those reports and make sense of them, so you really have got to make sure that the information is clean, because as they say: 'garbage in, garbage out.'

RT: So many MSPs I come across really struggle to get their engineers to log time, because they don't understand why they need to. It sounds as though you've nailed that, and by letting the engineers know that their job is not just to fix issues, but they're part of the business as a whole, and the time has to be logged to show where the business can be more profitable.

MT: I'd agree with that. I'm very much about instilling a business culture and the engineers may not get it right all the time, but I've shared the vision of the whole vision with them – where we'd like to go and where they'd like to go. As well as team meetings, we have strategy get-togethers, and I feel it's important to include the engineers in that.

They're brought into the whole enterprise, and as part of that they understand why we need to know who's paying our bills and who isn't. I believe IT people are getting more business savvy, and there are many technicians out there who do understand all this, they've just never had a chance to be included.

RT: How long have you been a member of the Network Group? I know you're keen on collaboration and sharing your knowledge, so tell me what you get out of that. Aren't you giving away all of your trade secrets to all the other IT companies out there?

MT: I've been a member for about seven years. I suppose you could look at it both ways, but when I consider my business, and those of the other members, we are the managers and owners, no matter how good our staff are.

That can be a lonely role, and you can also struggle for ideas. To join a group of similar-minded people who have the same problems and issues, who may have the solution to a problem that you've got, or you have solutions for them, is really inspirational. It makes life so much easier.

And why we share is based on experience – if you do it once and get a great result, you're going to do it again. You see other people doing it when you first join the group, and you feel a bit of trepidation about telling them what your golden egg is, but you soon realise that by giving one egg away you get six back.

RT: Where do you look for inspiration, and how do you keep your mind sharp and learn about new things?

MT: I pick up a lot from The Network Group, as they have great-quality speakers, and also at CompTIA events. You can't spend too much time out of the office, but when you run a business it's important to take direction and new ideas.

I book myself on three or four events per year where I know I'll get value, as well as five Network Group meetings. That's nearly one per month, but it's essential business-development time that you have to invest to go forward.

RT: Are you a reader? Do you read a lot of books?

MT: I do. The Managing Director of The Network Group is an avid book reader and always has a lot of recommendations.

RT: What was the latest book you read that made an impression on you?

MT: It was probably one that I revisited, because I gave a copy to all the staff, which was Mark Sanborn's The Fred Factor. It's a simple book to read, but the lessons within it are still relevant today.

RT: Do you read blogs or listen to podcasts?

MT: It's difficult to find time to do it sometimes, but I do search around for things that are relevant. I often look at things that are signposted from MSP Mentor and other sites, as well as listening to your podcast, Richard. It's valuable developmental time for your business.

RT: You talked before about disaster recovery and business continuity. Do you use a specific tool for that – a hybrid or something you built yourself?

MT: All of the above, unfortunately. I think that market is like that, as we've held a couple of sessions on it at Network Group, and there were so many solutions available to people.

In Astrix, we use three at the minute: we've started to use Continuum's offering, which is great because it's backed by the network operation centre. We also use the Datto version, which is a bit more high-end and one I'm careful of using in Wales, because you have to tailor these things to what people can afford.

We also have our own racks in a data centre local to us. We built our own array and use a piece of software called Assay to backup to that. It's a good price point for our smaller customers, because at least they get some DR (data recovery) at a reasonable price.

We constantly review all of these, because things change all the time, and so do people's expectations. We're constantly trying to improve on our offerings, so these are the ones we use at the moment.

RT: You make an interesting point about what the market will bear, because I used to use Assay, but I know that things have moved on with Continuum and Datto's offerings. If people don't see the value in something, they're not going to go ahead with it.

MT: Yes, and I'd rather give them something than nothing. We see so many crypto-infections, so customers need to be protected from those. Our offering is not quite as comprehensive as some others, but at least it works.

RT: Just on a tangent, have you had any clients who've been affected by CryptoLocker? Have you had to get them out of a horrible situation?

MT: Unfortunately, we've had many. The direction of our company is going headlong towards security and preventing things like CryptoLocker, and hopefully recovering people from it. In the last three weeks, we've had two clients with problems – one was with a laptop, which was quite important, and the other was a whole server system.

It's a difficult thing to resolve and it's hard to manage the customers, because they're at a point of extreme stress, so you really have to get your kid gloves on and not say "I told you so" when they haven't taken preventative measures.

RT: It must be incredibly frustrating when you've given advice that people don't take.

MT: It is, and I think people listening to this will sympathise. You tell people to do something and when they don't it's frustrating but you have to be magnanimous. It's going to cost them money to fix it, but you get on with it.

We've found that the clients who've done that in the past then go on to be your biggest evangelists and will tell everyone about you. People are very appreciative when you've rescued their business, which is nice for the engineers.

The numbers are on the increase, unfortunately, and we've had manual and automated CryptoLocker attacks, advanced persistent threats or lost £22,000 through phishing – you name it, we've seen it, and some people have paid the ransoms.

We've moved to education, so we're now teaching staff what to look for in a phishing email, which are notoriously difficult to defend against. First of all, you never pay anyone on the basis of an email they've sent, and we give them basic security training. It's rewarding and something a bit different.
RT: Going back to customers who become evangelists and sell you to other people – what do you do in terms of marketing, apart from referrals and word of mouth, which clearly work well for you. How you do proactively find people who don't already know about Astrix?

MT: We've tried a lot of things for various products, such as flyers, and they've not worked particularly well, probably because we're not the best at marketing. We've put most of our efforts into social media, and we have a blog. I try to do some of the writing and I've also got someone to do it for me, and that generates a nice amount of action to our website and increases our contacts.

The other area we focus on is security, because people like to talk in-depth about it, and we've put on a series of events where people can come along and ask us any questions they have.

We're also going to do some co-events with our accountants, because people often have questions around security when they move to cloud-based accounting. They'll tend to go to the accountant for advice rather than an IT reseller, so partnering up works quite well, and we're trying to ramp that system up a bit.

RT: I'm going to throw a question back at you – you originally asked me this and I thought it was fascinating. If you were to start Astrix or an MSP business tomorrow, what would you do differently?

MT: Good question! Based on where we're located, I'd almost definitely go cloud and cloud security only. I'd do everything remotely and wouldn't have anyone on the ground. I think there's huge potential in that area, and you can work alongside current providers and internal departments without any threat, so I think marketing would be a lot easier.

You'd have a very clear way of where you're going and what you're achieving. I can't criticise anyone who's doing any of the things I do, but if I started again today, that's where it would be.

RT: What's in the future for Astrix?

MT: Security is our number one focus now, so we're gathering more certification and getting extra training. We've become a certification body for cyber essentials standards which is gathering pace and becoming a good badge for any company to prove they've done some work in that area.

We've moved into internet provision as part of the London Internet Exchange and RIPE. It's not an area we ever thought we'd get into, and we fell into it by accident, but with software-defined networking it goes hand in hand with security. There's a huge amount of growth in that area, so that's where I see us going, and in three years we'll hopefully be the best in Wales at that!