



RT: Leigh Wood is the owner of Bedfordshire-based MSP Node IT Solutions. Node were founded in 2008 and they specialise in improving the productivity of businesses with 100 to a thousand employees, specifically by using Microsoft 365.

Leigh, we're going to talk about Microsoft 365 and a whole raft of things, but I want to start things off by asking you about Node IT specifically, because your business turns 10 this year, 2018. What would you say is the biggest change you've seen in the MSP (managed service provider) industry during that last 10 years?

LW: Well, firstly we started to be called MSPs! When we started, I think it was about three years in when we discovered at that point that tools like SolarWinds, Logic Now GFI, it was back then and had just been bought out from Hound Dog. When we discovered that tool and start to work with it, it was a revelation.

I was trying to remember the name the tool we used – COGO was our remote access to it was free and we were using that back in the day, and then we found this tool, it was amazing. The world opened up to us and then we got called MSP and we're like, 'What's that? We're an IT support company, aren't we?'

From there on, a wider world opened up, we start to meet more people, started to develop our own way of working, tools and things. I'd say the world of support has changed massively. I think the tools we've got available to us in the UK, I think a lot of the stuff was in the US earlier than it was in the UK, it's fabulous.

The things we can do remotely, things we can automate, that is a way it's changed massively, but also the message of what an MSP is and who we are, and we're no longer about fixing kit. In fact, the last thing we really want to do is fix kit. What we want to do is bring value to a business, and help a business develop and use IT.

It's what we call one of the foundations of a company - good computers, good IT processes and methods and empowering people to use the tools. I think our role has changed from fixing someone's computer when it doesn't work and Outlook doesn't work to, 'That *will* work, that's OK. How are you going to use your tools? How are you going to be able to communicate?'

'How you're going to collaborate? What difference can we make to your business?' And then having real business conversations with business owners rather than technical conversations, which they really don't care about.

RT: MSP, you've mentioned the magic word there. How do you define an MSP? Because there's lots of debate in the industry about what exactly a managed service provider, an MSP is? Why are Node an MSP?

LW: An MSP to me is a partner, who looks after the IT and all the foundational services, as I said earlier but we are a real partner in the business, because we have to know what the business is doing and what their goal and vision is. We have to make sure that the systems they have will help them deliver that vision and the values and the goals of the organisation.

We do that through the basic stuff like fixing problems, but also putting in systems that work, delivering new solutions to them which will help them, and making sure that the business has got what it needs to deliver to its customers to deliver to each other. The MSP role of fixing stuff is still there, the MSP role of monitoring everything is still there.

But I think especially with cloud services taking away a lot of the grunt work that we once had, I don't put that many servers into customers anymore. If you come to me as a new organisation or a business, I will be putting in a server. That's my last choice.

That grunt work's going and actually that's freeing us up to have a deeper and more valuable conversation. So, a managed service provider, yes, we're managing these services, but we're also helping the business.

RT: That makes total sense. You've already touched upon some of the tools that you've previously used and maybe still do. What are the tools that Node use or that you use within the business? And a follow-on question - what's the tool that you couldn't live without now that you've got it within the business now?

LW: I've got a list I could go through. I mean the core products, core products, ConnectWise, that's our PSA (professional services automation). Everything lives and breathes through that. We do all our billing, our service desk, all our projects and sales - all that lives and breathes through ConnectWise. That is the heart of the business for our data and information and know where everybody lives.

Then we've got a set of satellite tools that live around ConnectWise. We've got IT Glue, an amazing product, a great documentation product, and we've been with them since they launched in the UK. We've got Continuum. That's a really interesting point - we moved away from SolarWinds to Continuum so we would have the advantage of the NOC (network operations centre), because we do have servers out there, and that's really helped with the 24/7 maintenance and management of servers.

We're also starting to look at using HelpDesk so we can take some of the reactionary tickets out of our business, so the team are then freed up to do delivery and get projects done, to do some of the meaty, high value work and Continuum is a great service for that. I'm a fan of it – it's a great tool.

Auvik – what a great tool! We were using PRTG for many years and I love them, but Auvik came around and I can't recommend them highly enough. They're a great team as well. At Inspire I played a bit of blackjack with the team and they did better than I did!

The fact that we can really drill and see the systems and what replacements might be needed is great. We've got a customer that we've looked after for 10 years and we've refreshed their entire network when we first moved in - fully Cisco, and it's run absolutely rock solid. It's a lovely network. We took out all the old kit, put Auvik on and it went around, using an SNP (scalable networking pack), gave us an amazing map of the network and also this little three com switch appeared on the network. We were like, 'Well what's that? Where's that come from?!'

RT: So, you literally weren't aware of the three-com switch before?

LW: Well, I was because I physically took it off the network! I'd taken it off the network and it was in their store cupboard as far as I was aware, or it had actually been scrapped, and now it actually turned that one of the people at the site wanted to connect a computer up. So, he thought, 'Well, I'll pull this out of the store cupboard' and stuck it in and we didn't know it was there!

You wouldn't have that visibility without something like Auvik, which really maps the network and then brings in the alerts. I'm going off on an Auvik trip here, but one the great things that Auvik has done for us is it backs up the configs of every device.

If someone makes a change, you can easily roll it back. Or say a customer site is offline, you've got all the information about the customer's site to reference to. That's really opened well, because I think you'll find a lot of IT guys are either really good at networking or really don't like networking. I was really in the other camp, I was in the camp of 'don't like networking, but I have to do it', and it's really opened up a whole skillset within our business that has made it more powerful for us to support our customers.

The tool I couldn't live without is Microsoft Teams, and that's relatively new to us in the business. We looked at when it first came out a year or so ago, and it was okay, but we weren't sure how it would fit. Then we started a business development project at the beginning of this year and we needed a place where we could have an email information, we could have our plans in there, we could have Excel spreadsheets, we could have things that showed goals and KPIs (key performance indicators), all of these different, disparate parts of data.

We thought, 'You know what, let's try using Teams', and it's been fantastic. We've got a great windowpane on the business or on a on a particular project, and you can bring all the different tools that are in the Office 365 suite into this one place. I think it really is the killer application that Microsoft have created and we use it now for our day to day comms with each other, for chat, for instant messaging, if you need to ask a quick question.

We use it for video conferencing. We've used it for meetings and then when we were in a meeting, we can we take our notes in there. We've got OneNote. It's a fantastic tool. I think it was the one thing Office 365 was missing was that thing to bind it altogether and now we've got Teams. It's fantastic. I think that right now is the tool that was making a big difference in my business.

RT: We use Slack internally here at TeamTubb, which is a similar sort of premise. Let's talk a little bit more about this Office 365, perhaps versus Google Apps and the other things on the market.

I've drunk the Google Kool Aid. I moved from Microsoft products when I was an MSP way back in the day and moved wholeheartedly across to Google. And the reason I did that is for the integration with third party apps. It integrates with Slack that we use heavily now, integrates with Nimble CRM (customer relationship management) and so on and so forth.

It sounds as though, since those days Microsoft have really got good traction here and built to be tools like Teams and things that surrounds the Office 365 infrastructure. Talk to me a little bit more about Microsoft 365.

Why did you choose that as your tool of choice? If I can call it a tool; it's more like an infrastructure really. And I know you've partnered really deeply with Microsoft to deliver those 365 solutions. What did that whole story look like for you?

LW: This was probably the first partnership. I'll go back a bit further, I'm going right back to the start of my career in 95, 96. I was a network guy. I started with Network 302, Network 4, One, Five, Network 6, I've got Novell NetWare CNE6 qualified

RT: I was only a CNA (Certified Novell Administrator) myself, so I doff my cap to you.

LW: You should do! You do realise that a CNA has to salute a CNE (Certified Novell Engineer), every time he sees them! That is the rule!

RT: The listeners can't see this, but I'm saluting you.

LW: I was Novell through and through and when I started Node IT in my previous job, this was 10 years ago now, so I'd still just pretty much finished delivering a Novell 6 or 5 infrastructure, so right up to 10, 11 years ago, we were still doing a lot of NetWare.

When I started Node IT, I was Mr Netware and I didn't really know Microsoft, I knew nothing about Active Directory and nothing about that side of things. I had had to look after windows servers for many years, but really, I was the network guy.

Starting Node, I realised, 'Oh crikey, everyone else runs Microsoft, so I'm going to have to learn about it!' I remember our first job was running an exchange cluster. We put an exchange cluster in for a customer, a two-server cluster, and I had to design and build it and I learned how to install Exchange on that job and develop it. It was a bit of a baptism of fire. Come forward 10 years and I'm now Mr Microsoft. Now, as a network guy, you would never, ever think that would happen.

If you go back five or six years, we were running a little SBS (standard procurement system) box in the office. It was all we had and that was running our email and I was never a fan of SBS. I think it was the devil's own products and there are lots of people loved it, made a lot of money out of it, but a devil's on product as far as I'm concerned and gives you headaches. Even when they come up today I go, 'Oh really? That's a migration project!'

We ran the SBS box and Office 365 was in beta. We'd looked at BPoS, which is a predecessor and Office 365 was in beta. Microsoft was an action pack partner and I looked at it and I said to my business partner, 'This looks really good, it means we have to run an email server. We can switch the server off, let's go to it,' and we literally moved up to it that day.

We haven't looked back since. We love the product. Office 365 when it first came out, probably when you moved to Google, was nothing to what the product is today. Really nothing compared. But we had great email, we had Link which allowed us to instant message, which we loved. It became a stalwart of the business, and even when it became Skype for Business and now Teams.

We had OneDrive or SkyDrive as it was at the time, and then SharePoint, which we didn't really get, but we've learned over the years how to cope and deal with SharePoint, and it's actually really come to be a much better product. That's where it began, really. I wanted to get rid of this server, here's a tool. It's free, because Microsoft have given us the licenses because we're an action pack partner, what's not to like? And we just got into it and then we realised, 'This is great!'

We had a lot of customers who had SMTP, POP3 mailboxes, and we had all sorts of weird and wonderful mail servers here, there and everywhere, and we just migrated them over to it.

As the years got on, we got into some early migration projects. We do some meeting migration projects for colleges and schools. We did one for one of our customers and that was a 2003 exchange server to Office 365, and this was before all these wonderful tools like

SkyKick, Pic Titan, CloudMigrator existed - actually CloudMigrator did exist, that's the one we used.

It was an absolute nightmare getting that over. That's where the relationship began with Microsoft, and as in regards Office 365. I made the decision then, because Google Apps was out, and it wasn't anything deep at the time, the decision was we would do Google or we'd do Office 365. We can't do both. If we do both, there are only three of us in the team at the time, we'll be all over the shop, we'll be doing this and that and we won't be able to do a coherent service.

We said, that's it, Office 365 is what Node IT does, that's all we're going to do, we're not going to go and do Google. If you want to do Google, fantastic, brilliant. Enjoy yourself, but you're not going to be one of our customers, because we can't help you in that.

There are some fantastic Google people out there - go and speak to them about Google. And off they went, if they did that, but most of our customers went Office 365. All of our customers have come to us wanting Office 365, and we know that.

I've got our team who know the product really well. We can migrate users, I think we've got some like 57,000 mailboxes under our belt of migrations over the years. Then we've done some really big migrations, and unfortunately, we don't have 50,000 customers and we've done it for other people, but we get brought in to do large scale migrations for people.

We know that product really well. We carried on that ethos into other products, such as backup. When Datto came into the UK, I was like, 'This is great. This is what we need as a backup product'. We just do Datto. We don't do other products because my team know Datto. I've got Datto-qualified engineers. I've got a great relationship with Datto, and if it's an issue, we know we can pull the server up, we don't have a problem. If you're running something else, I can't really guarantee I'm going to go be able to deliver that service.

Managed firewall service, FortiGate, nothing else. None of your WatchGuard or your SonicWall or any of that. We do FortiGate. And that's the only product we do because again, the team know the product really well. It's a great product, great security, and we can provide a service which is reliable, repeatable, and we know that works. So that's why. I'm not one of these people who feels I've got to slag off the opposition. I don't feel I need to say, 'Office 365 has got better features than Google. I won't say that, and it's not because it's not true, it's because I just believe in this product and that's what I can deal with.

I'm sure if you've got Google, you'll have a great, wonderful life and you have great features. It's like driving a car. All cars have got four wheels on most of them, four wheels and a steering wheel, and some seats and they go forward, backwards, left and right. Google delivers email, lets you share files and collaborate. Office 365 delivers email, allows you to share and collaborate.

RT: I love that. I love that philosophy and especially the idea of being open and honest and saying, 'Hey, look, we're an Office 365 shop, Google does the job really well, but that's not at all what we focus on'. I don't think there's any upside at all for denigrating the opposition or

for being, so matter of fact about things and saying, 'Look, we've made the right choice, and if you choose anything other than what we've chosen you're wrong.'

Case in point here. I'm using the Google Apps Suite or whatever it's called this week. It's a really good fit for me, but my needs are different, the same as some of your customers out there.

The other thing I really like about what you said there, is about picking a vendor and going deep on it. I see so many MSPs who who choose just to support everything and anything and that's admirable, they're trying to do it to help their clients, but actually I think they're doing the clients a disservice from a certain angle, because they're not going deep with that vendor support.

I want to touch on that a little bit more. You've already mentioned this earlier on in our conversation, but you visited Microsoft Inspire, which for some of the older members of the MSP community, like myself, used to be known as WPC - the Worldwide Partner Conference. Inspire this year was in Las Vegas. Why did you make that trip and what did you get out of it?

LW: We work with another partner company called Identity Experts, who are based in Huddersfield and Matt Brunton, one of the directors of that company, I've known him for many years. He was in a different company and did migrations for that other company in the past. We've always got on and had a good conversation and had a good laugh and done some good work together.

He held an event, because they've done a fantastic job of partnering with Microsoft, and they are real specialist in identity, and they do an Azure identities protocol called MIM, and they do large scale identity products

RT: And what was the name of the company again?

LW: Identity Experts.

RT: Identity Experts. We'll include that in the show notes for anybody interested, give her a bit of a shoutout for them.

LW: They're the great guys, but they've really worked the Microsoft partnership. They've got a toolset that works for Microsoft and that Microsoft use, and they've really worked at it and they've got a great relationship. In May the team held an event down at Microsoft in Reading, and in that event, I got to meet some of the higher up people in Microsoft, who really understood the market I was in and gave some fantastic advice as to what I should be doing in my business, to make us align more with Microsoft.

Matt gave me some great advice. He said to me, 'You need to go to Inspire'. And I looked at the cost of it and I was like, 'No, I can't do it. I'll go next year'. But I've said that for the last five years.

And then about two and a half weeks before Inspire, Matt called me and said, 'Look, we've got some work for you, can you do these migrations for us over the summer?'

I was like, 'Yeah, no problem'. And he said, 'Are you going to Inspire?' And I said, 'No, I'm not, because cash and this and that, and timings and stuff.' He said, 'You need to go'. He kind of guilted me into it, to be honest.

So, two weeks before Inspire, I booked my ticket. The worst time because a) there's no flights so you pay more for your flights, more for your hotel and you pay more for your ticket. Probably cost me a thousand pounds more than it should do, but I thought, 'Do you know what? I'm going to go.' And it was pretty much 10 years to the day that started the business. I thought, 'Well, I deserve some sort of reward for 10 years of running this organisation - I am off to Las Vegas.' So, I went off on my own, and I had to tell the kids that Daddy's off to America, which didn't go down too well – like a lead balloon! Two weeks later I was on the flight.

The thing that Matt said to me was, 'You'll get to meet people from Microsoft that you will never get to meet anywhere else. You'll understand Microsoft's way of doing things more than you'll ever do. And you just get a lot more exposure and links that will really help you take your business forward.' He basically said, 'You've got to do it. Get yourself to inspire'. So I did.

RT: Las Vegas, hardly the worst place in the world for a conference to be held. What was your experience like at It inspire as your very first WPC to go along to?

I'll split that into two things. Las Vegas is the place I've always wanted to go. My mum's a massive Elvis fan, the whole Viva Las Vegas thing. I was brought up on American Trilogy and I've always wanted to go there. It is completely and utterly bonkers.

I came out with the phrase, I think Las Vegas is both the best and worst examples of humanity in one place. It's basically the best because the sheer ingenuity that they have put together to make this place actually exist in a desert is extraordinary. The worst for everything it stands for. It's just about greed and getting money.

I had a fantastic time. I was on my own, lone traveller. Went to a few museums – the Pinball Museum. Oh my God, if you go to Las Vegas, check out the Pinball Hall of Fame. About 80 pinball tables and classic arcade games. Everything from Dragon's Lair to Spy Hunter.

RT: I had no idea this place existed! I've spoken at Las Vegas before and I was never even aware of this.

LW: It's awesome. I loved pinball when I was a kid growing up. I went in that and I'm at about \$20 on me and everything is like 50 cents or 75 five cents, but nearer 50 cents. Two and a half hours later my hands were killing me, but I was still playing pinball and had a fantastic time.

RT: My friend Vin Jahul of WEM Solutions, based in London, is a massive pinball fan. He's never mentioned this place, so Vin, if you're listening to this, we must organise a trip soon!

LW: Yeah, forget about Microsoft! It's all about the Pinball Hall of Fame! You gave me a fantastic link, to Guy Gregory at Microsoft. The first morning I was in there and I literally did a LinkedIn to him. He said, 'I'm off to the Shelby Museum. Do you want to come along to that?'

So, I went to the Shelby Ford Mustang museum and everything like that. And that was my first introduction to someone at Microsoft. And it turned out I'd been stood in front of the guy for two hours in the passport queue the previous day. That was a bit of a coincidence! He was a really lovely bloke and we had a good chat.

RT: Guy is a fantastic guy. He worked at a number of MSPs before he joined Microsoft so really in touch with our community and understanding what it's all about.

LW: So, the whole Las Vegas experience - bonkers place, but then we get into Inspire itself. I went to the first-time attendees session which was on the Sunday afternoon. And I think what I hadn't got was a scale of Las Vegas and the scale of conferences at Las Vegas, and the amount of walking. My step counter was about 18,000 steps a day and that was just walking around conference rooms!

If you go for a first time, do go to the orientation meeting, it was really useful. Helped me enormously to understand the scale of what I was visiting and how to get the best out of it. And it is long days, it is very long days. This is the thing. People were saying, 'Oh, you're on holiday', but it didn't feel like it.

The conference started at 8:30 every day and went through to 6:00, and every day on the Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday that was time I was in the conference. I was there all day and getting the most out of it. Getting the notes, writing things down, understanding how that affects the business and then reporting back to the team immediately as well. They were getting instant feedback from me about things I was learning.

On the Sunday I was invited to the Enterprise Mobility and Security event, and that was fabulous. We were in this amazing venue. You could look right over Las Vegas and it was a pretty exclusive place. Some of the best beef I've ever eaten in my life. Incredible.

But in that room were some fantastic people who were really high in Microsoft, really influential people as well. There was a lot of product managers who look after partners. Now I am not a partner that's looked after by Microsoft directly. This thing about how Microsoft partnership works - if you can bring a service to Microsoft that they can use, which they will help them deliver to make some of the large-scale projects, then you will get a partner manager.

You'll have a manager assigned to you and you will be looked after. There are very few of those people in the UK, I think there's about 300 who get a partner manager. They did a big cull of them a few years back and you don't get partner managers in the UK.

I met partner managers from around the other countries, particularly a guy from South Africa, again, full of advice. You're there having a chat, very casual, very relaxed. He gave me a lot of advice about CSP (cloud service provider) relationships, which is where we could provide

licences direct to our customers in Office 365 and all of Microsoft Azure Suite. In fact, even on-premise services are now coming to CSP.

As an aside here, as advice to people listening, if you're a Microsoft partner and you're not CSP you're missing out, because the margins in licencing and the ability to deliver licencing direct to your customer, you own the billing, not Microsoft.

By owning the billing, revenue comes into our business. We pay our partner, Message Stream in the UK, on a monthly basis by direct debit. That means we're getting our margin in our pocket. We're not having to wait for rebates or anything like that. Also, they're now starting to provide on-premise licensing for Windows server and CALs (client access licences) and SQL (Structured Query Language) server through the CSP model.

He gave me the advice that where you are in the market as an MSP, you're not likely to get a partner manager. However, you can start delivering our services. Where you really need to make your relationship is with your CSP partner, with your tier one CSP partner. You need to really work on that, because that's where you'll really start to get value and then start to match up your marketing, your methodology, what you're putting out to the Microsoft message and you will succeed.

Then over the next few days I discovered that message was really being pushed out there, but also Microsoft have stepped up a gear in the tools they provide. Under Steve Bulmer, the Microsoft partner network was being pretty much disbanded. Under Satcher, he really gets it, and you can feel the difference in the organisation.

I think this was another thing I gained from Inspire was the difference that man has made to that organisation. It's about having a vision and value of partnership, of wanting to help other people in the world and to really use this amazing company they have, which is incredibly powerful, for good, and to help people succeed.

That's really come through everybody I met there, and the partnership programme has changed, and I've seen it over the last eight years or so that I've been a partner, go from being really good to being fantastic, which is the point we're now.

The tools that were made available to as partners in Inspire and is available to all partners out there - marketing tools, tools for learning, tools for getting my team up to date, tools for providing to our customers was phenomenal.

One of the things that all IT people struggle with is marketing, and they've given us some amazing tools for marketing so we can get the message across to people. Everyone I met was like, OK, here's where you go to find information,' and it was really useful stuff.

This guy just said, go speak to your CSP and I've reached out to my CSP tier one now and they're arranging a meeting so we can look at how we can work more closely together with them, to improve our services to our customers.

RT: So, big expense, big commitment to go to Inspire. But it sounds as though you've more than reaped the rewards already.

One of the things Node IT have always done is we've always been on the curve. I think what we had never done is fully realised that we were on the curve or ahead of that curve, and now we're as real as we are, in particular when it comes to moving people to fulltime platform.

It's cloud first, it's modern desktop - these are some of the phrases that we're coming out with but really stick with. The Microsoft 365 suite, which brings together Office 365, brings the Enterprise Mobility and Security suite, which is all about advanced security protection, mobility. Things like Intune for mobile device management and windows 10 Enterprise. It brings it together into one suite.

The Microsoft 365 suite is just fantastic, and they've really pushed that. That is the big difference, because with that suite I can go to a customer and say we're going to move fully cloud and we're already doing it. We were doing our first one before we went out to inspire. We were learning it and I realised that yes, we've got it.

I know there are many MSPs in the country because they ringing me up asking how are we doing this? They want to know how to do this, how they can take someone fully cloud. I've got a team who know to do it because we've embedded. It goes back to the earlier message - we've learned the product, we've learned the system, we've learned how it works.

I've got one of my engineers, he will take a customer from an onsite active directory and he knows how to migrate that all up into Azure, into Active Directory, migrate all the computers over, get the data up into SharePoint, give them the tools and as long as they haven't got any key line of business application that can't be moved to the cloud, then we can put them fully cloud. We've done that for several customers.

There are very few products, apart from very particular things which won't go into the cloud. I say that, recently I found that specific tools in specific industries where somebody has really niched it, like a CRM tool or a tool to manage particular businesses such as hire companies. I've seen it within recruitment and all sorts of growth companies.

Someone's done that and they've not made the cloud version, because they haven't got the resources to do it. To me, there's an opportunity there for someone to come in and just say, 'OK, I've got a cloud version of what you do. I'll make it better,' and then we'll just migrate them off to it.

But other than key line of business applications, most people can go straight to cloud. I was talking to a customer last week and the only thing they've got is Sage, which is currently running on a hosted desktop service and we can take that to the cloud. We can even move them over to Xero or we move them to Sage Online if that's appropriate for them.

Once we've got that tool, they've got no need for a server onsite, everything's Azure and Office 365, so they've become truly mobile. The security suite around Office 365, I think is second to none. It really is extraordinary what we can do around securing identity and securing your data.

RT: Let's talk some more about cybersecurity, but before we do, I just want to ask you a simple question. Having attended Inspire, albeit at the last minute, will you be attending Inspire next year?

LW: Here's my hint and tip for first time attendees. At the end of the thing, they have a return visit for first time attendees where you can go there in the morning and they do it right after the big party on the Wednesday night. You're down there at 8:30 on a Thursday morning: 'How was your Inspire?'

I stood up to say something about my Inspire. I didn't even get to talk because some other guy rabbitied on so much – he liked the sound of his own voice. I didn't get to speak, but because I stood up. I got a \$500-off voucher for the next Inspire. So yes, I'll be going to the next Inspire because I've got \$500 off the cost.

RT: Winning. We're going to share your social media details later on too, so if anybody wants to reach out to you, I would encourage anybody listening to this who's not attended Inspire before, first of all to go. I certainly did it within my MSP business and it wasn't a huge catalyst. But secondly, to prep for it and to reach out to people like Leigh and Guy Gregory who we've mentioned, and there's other UK partners going across there, because it makes the world of difference, doesn't it, to meet these people and to make the most of your investment.

LW: I wish I planned more for it. That's my lesson here, because I did it somewhat at the last minute. I'm already planning for July next year and I'm already thinking about how we work in, and make sure the family holiday doesn't follow directly on like it did this year!

Planning ahead so then you can start to make connections before you go to Inspire and understand who's out there, and then set meetings up before you go out there. That would be a key tip there. If you know you're going to go, decide that, pay for it so that's done and then plan in how you're going to get your flights and everything like that, and, who you're going to speak to.

I met another MSP out there on my first night and they were at the first-time attendees' event, a couple guys from Scotland, and on the MSP journey they're not that far down the line, but from an IT business they're much further down the line than I am – they're an older company.

For them, it was their first visit to see anything like this, the wider community. I've been in the wider community for a long time, and I was like, 'You guys are great guys. You're here, and that sets you aside from everybody else', because if you don't go to Inspire, you don't hear these messages, you don't see these things. You don't see what Microsoft are doing. You don't see how technology's changing and that does set you apart.

I think it really says something about you as a business, the fact that you're willing to invest and Microsoft appreciate that. Also, the important thing to do when you come back, and I did this, is have a presentation to your team.

RT: Great advice.

LW: Show them what you got from it and show them how it's going to change the business, and how you're going to use it within the business. You can't keep it to yourself, it's got to be spread across the team.

RT: I'm going to share in the show notes a link to a blog post I wrote, it must be 12 years ago now when I first went to WPC. It's interesting to see that a lot of the advice that you've shared there absolutely remains true.

I mean, it was WPC back then. It's Inspire now, but the preparation, reaching out to people, making sure everything's organised in advance. Even the way you spend your time at the actual events. It's all great.

I definitely want to read.

LW: One thing extra on that - if you didn't go to Inspire, that doesn't mean you can't watch the sessions. Go to the Inspire website, you can log on and all the call notes for each speech are there, which are fantastic, but also a lot the individual sessions about Microsoft 365, about sales, marketing, all these different sessions that will run throughout the entire three days.

You can go and watch them, so those sessions I didn't get to go to I've been watching the videos. Watch one a day, you'll pick something up from it. So even if you didn't go to Inspire, you can get something from it yourself.

RT: Fantastic advice. Now, where is Inspire next year?

LW: Las Vegas

RT: Las Vegas. Forgive me for being a Google person out of the loop with the Microsoft conferences and stuff. Is that going to be a regular thing in Las Vegas now? Because they used to move around.

LW: I believe so. What they did this year, which is different, is Microsoft have another conference for the internal team. This was done at the same time as the year end or the new financial year - SFY19. I learnt all the lingo! And they had Microsoft ready. That was the internal conference, so there were a lot of Microsoft people out there and they are in Ready and we were in Inspire and there's a bit of cross pollination between the two. For Microsoft it was from Saturday to Saturday, so there's a full week in Vegas. There were lots of things going on, lots of different things. When we finished on Thursday, Microsoft Ready continued on and people there to do training and the UK partner team were out there.

I think that because it was more like 35,000 people, Las Vegas is one of the few places in the world where you can accommodate that. And I remember chatting to one of my Uber drivers - I learned how to use Uber when I was in Vegas – and I said, 'Yes, it's a really big conference.' He asked me how many and I said 35,000. He said, 'Oh, that's small! 115,000, that's big, but 35,000 is a small one, we can easily cope with that'.

The scale of these hotels is extraordinary. So, Vegas is where they've set their heart on, so it'll be Vegas next year. Bonkers place to be in!

RT: Well, thanks for sharing that. Now, before we talk about cybersecurity, and I definitely want to get onto this subject because you're an expert in this area. You talked specifically about community, about being exposed to some of these ideas previously.

Peer collaboration. I know that Node are a member of The Network Group and I've seen you at CompTIA meetings. Talk to me about why community is important to you, and what do you get from it personally, and what do Node get from being a part of the community as a business?

LW: About five years ago, I took on Node fully myself. I didn't know there was a community of IT people and there was so much I didn't know about. I was actually just muscle and feel, as the HTG guys like to call it. I knew nothing about the wider community and I just thought every IT company out there was your competition and your enemy and I didn't know that people talked to each other.

I was listening to this podcast, and while podcasts became fashionable recently, I was listening to podcasts years and years ago when they first came out, so I've been listening to the, all the time.

I was listening to this guy called Richard Tubb and he was constantly going on about stuff. And I was like, 'Oh, this is interesting, but how does he know that?' And you mentioned things like CompTIA, so I looked them up and thought, 'I'm not sure about that.'

Then I went to GFI and did a conference and I met John Towers and David from Grant McGregor. And they were the first two other IT people I'd ever spoken to, and they opened my eyes. They told me about various things out there, like CompTIA.

And of course, Gemma Telford from IT Marketing at the time. She was a customer of mine at the time. In fact, it was at Gemma's where we first met.

RT: That's right. Gemma has previously been on this podcast, in fact, I think it was episode five or six. Going back quite some time!

LW: She was involved in CompTIA and I was at GFI and I was talking to people and I was like, 'Wow, this is amazing. People talk to each other and have got ideas. It opened my mind a little bit and I met CompTIA and joined up. And then did nothing with it.'

The following March I went to my first community meeting, at CompTIA, and basically met some fantastic people like yourself. I met lots of different IT company owners and that really began my journey into community. And I know that my business wouldn't be what it is today without community and without the wider community in the UK.

I think people are often surprised when I tell them, 'You can go and speak to another IT owner and they will tell you their problems, or they'll tell you they'll help you fix your own

issues. or they will share.' That's what CompTIA give. About 18 months ago, I joined Network Group.

I first heard about Network Group through your podcast, an interview with Phil Morgan that you did a long time ago. That became like an aspiration, to join Network Group, because it sounds like a great group and they have particular requirements to join. I thought, 'Will I ever be able to do that?' And a couple years later I met Mostyn and then I met Phil and I got brought into Network Group.

Now, what Network Group gives me is a phenomenal peer group of people who are like-minded, want to succeed, want to work together and will help you when you need it. I've had some fantastic support from members of the Network Group over the last year. I spent a day with Grant McGregor, where they showed us everything, how they operate and how they work together, what's important and how they deliver their vision and values and support the team.

We picked up so much from that one day. For someone to open the doors to their business and let you in, it's like leaving the front door open and letting people into your bedroom and everything, it's so personal, especially when it's another company who do what you do.

I wouldn't have that if they didn't have the trust of me and I didn't have the trust of them. That relationship, that builds over the years. When I've had some tough times in the business, I know that I can pick up the phone and say, 'Look, I've got this going on. Can you help me? What would you advise?' And I've had that advice and that support.

You cannot put a value on that. It's also opened my eyes to the other services that are out there. I got introduced to Continuum through Network Group, to Auvik and the way that we work as a team. There's a big movement now within Network Group in particular, being spearheaded by Martin Matthews around vision, value, use of Traction to help your business. Traction is the buzz book.

I honestly can't put as put value on the support that you get, and knowing that if you do these things they will work, or if it doesn't work there's always someone to speak to.

RT: Now, as somebody whose own MSP business was absolutely built on the back of collaboration and learning, I can't speak highly enough about it and I'm so glad it's working for you.

Let's talk cybersecurity. You've done significant pieces of work this year with GDPR, you've got cyber essentials and I know that you were an invited guest at the National Cybersecurity Centre this year as well. How do you see the state of cybersecurity for small businesses right now?

LW: I think we're at an exciting point now for cybersecurity. I started selling a managed firewall service about six years ago, based around Fortigate, and no one would buy. It was the hardest thing in the world to sell, but now it's kind of like, 'Yeah, we get it, we need that, fantastic. Tick', because the awareness is out there.

I think GDPR has done us a massive favour. I think people really didn't understand that there's this collective responsibility for cybersecurity at all sorts of levels. It's not the IT guys that are responsible for it alone. It is the business owner. It is the people in it who are doing the finances, the people on the ground, it's the personal and individual laptop. There aren't just technical defences, now, that will help you.

It's not like back in the day when we used to run around with a floppy disk, clean your computer and then virus has gone. It's not like that anymore. There are so many layers to cybersecurity and we can put the technology in place, but if we don't then teach the people to look after their accounts, look after their passwords and give them the training, then realistically someone's going to get in.

Just last week we had a customer who had a compromise of a username/password combination and it started sending out malicious content. The difference was then, we knew it was going out. We found out very quickly and we were able to take action, but not only that, the logs and the systems you've got in place, we were able to find out where it was coming from so we can see someone's logging in from Lagos.

We were able to take precautions and we looked at the account, talked to the customers and asked if anybody needed to log on to that particular account remotely. They said not when they thought about it, so we disabled remote access.

I put in what's called conditional access in Azure, and in this year so that account can only log in from within your premises. We reduced the threat straight away around that account for them, and were then able to give them the right advice of, 'Send this email out to your customers saying please don't click on the link, it's malicious and we've taken this action'.

Also having a relationship with a company that understands GDPR, we're able to call them and say are there any implications on this and they were able to say not on that particular one, but make sure you document what you've done.

That's just one example of something that happened last week. I think security by design is really important. You've got to design every system with security in mind, and if you do that from the beginning, there's a cost to it, but the cost is far greater if you are compromised and you don't take action and you don't mitigate the risks. No one's ever going to be 100% secure, people make out they're going to be 100% secure but they're not going to be. There's always a way around at some point.

As long as you're prepared for that and you've got processes in place to kick into gear like we had last week, then you mitigate that risk.

RT: What's your biggest frustration with the attitudes towards security from small businesses right now?

LW: It's not what it was. My frustration was, 'We don't need to do that' or that is still an attitude of, 'Well, you do that for us, don't you?' and we don't! We do, but we don't do it all.

You've got to take responsibility. I think now, in 2018, we're in a better place than we were in 2017.

People are aware of their responsibilities, as there have been some very big cases. I think WannaCry was a nice watershed moment for the country to actually see that we are vulnerable and something can really affect nationwide. Having your appointments cancelled in the NHS simply because the systems aren't working, really brought it home to people.

I think realistically we've got to spread the message through stories that are relevant to small businesses. It can be a small business that can go down with as little as £9,000, £10,000 pounds. These millions of pounds fines is one thing. But I know a company who struggled after losing 10 grand through a mandate fraud and that had a big impact on them. To be able to say to people this is what you need to do to prevent that happening to you again in the future or happening to you.

They're more aware of it and everybody knows about somebody else who's been affected. And I think the message is a lot easier to get across. I think they do, sometimes they think, 'Really, it's going to cost that much?' I say, 'Good products do'. One of my things is I don't use your SMB-type products and pricing products. I put in Datto and that costs more than other products will do.

I had a customer who got crypto-ed and we were able to bring them back. We could have brought it back within 10 minutes. We waited four hours to make sure that we cleaned everything up first. That came through somebody in the organisation doing the wrong thing.

RT: It's the human elements every time, isn't it?

LW: We can secure just about everything we can, but there's always somebody who says they've got admin rights or they have to have this and that. That's always a great argument, because then you can say, 'Well no you don't,' because the human element which is the only bit which is the hardest to secure against. And that is training and basically people spending time to understand what the impact would be on the organisation. These thieves, they go for it. They don't hold back.

We're also a member of Beds Cyber Trust. That works with Bedfordshire police, and that's been an eye-opener because with that we get to find out about local cybercrimes we meet on a regular basis with other IT companies and interested parties and the Beds police themselves and we get to find out about what's happening in our local area and the crimes that are going on.

Cyber-enabled crime as well as cybercrime, which are different things. Cyber-enabled crime is where you're using technology to commit a crime. The great thing about that is then we can pass the message out to people to say, 'Be aware these gangs are actually targeted in our area at the moment'. And they do. They actually target specific areas. That's been a fantastic partnership to have for Node IT

RT: It's massively overlooked. We used to partner with West Midlands police when I ran my own MSP and I think most IT companies would benefit from reaching out to their local police force and saying, 'Hey, first of all, how can we be of help? How can we help educate

people?' but also lots of authorities have got these schemes where you can keep your ear to the ground, you can understand what's happening and let your customers know. That's value-add for your clients.

LW: One of the other things that we're looking at, and you mentioned the NCSC (National Cyber Security Centre). They did a review of Cyber Essentials, and I think every IT company should have Cyber Essentials minimum and work towards Cyber Essentials Plus. We're currently IASME Gold. That's the certificate body we work with.

We found bringing customers up the Cyber Essentials standard has really worked well for us and we've helped a lot of customers do that. I went to the NCSC because they're reviewing the standard and that was amazing. The National Cybersecurity Centre is an incredible resource for us. The publications they create every week, the weekly threat report and they've also got service called CIF that you can apply to join, which is a private forum about security and threats.

We are very fortunate in this country to have the NCSC available to us. And also, we can use because it's crown copyright, as long as you refer back to its, we can use their materials to send to customers and say, 'Look, here's good password policy, here's an SMB guide for good cybersecurity, here's a small charities guide.

There's all this information available and it's an incredible resource and the UK is very fortunate to have them. And when I was down there, I met everybody, from companies who are single, one person in the company up to the head of security for BA systems. The challenges they have are varied and very wide and BA systems was incredible eye-opening opening conversation.

They said that they've got something like 50,000 companies in their supply chain, all of which have got to be secured in some way or fashion. Again, it's that collective responsibility we are all responsible to each other to protect each other from cybercrime.

RT: I'm aware that we're running towards the end of our time here. You've actually got a business to get on and run. I can't leave without reflecting things back on Node IT. You're in your 10th year of business. What's next on the horizon for Node IT and yourself? What's the biggest challenge that you're looking to overcome in the 12 months?

LW: I think we need to capitalise on the security opportunity, but also the opportunity to move people fully cloud. I think the Microsoft 365 suite is a real opportunity for us to work on. We're good at it, we know how it works and we know the value it can bring to customers.

Also, following on from that, making sure that we keep our customers informed and trained of how to use the products. One of the things that as a techie you can be complacent about is, 'I've installed that, move on.' We went back to customers two years ago and said, 'You've got Office 365 and we did a lunch and learn around the Office 365, and I started to do my presentation and I just did one little tip and someone said, 'Oh, how'd you do that?'

I abandoned the presentation and it turned into an hour session of getting the best out of the tool. Just giving someone a simple tip around Outlook is gold to them. How to quickly make a calendar invite, how to use Quick Tips.

I think the real thing that's going to come in the next year is running those training sessions, bringing that value and then having those conversations with people who are using these tools every day.

I think the other challenge that we need to address is the Virtual CIO type role. Having board level relationships and partnerships and finding out what they're trying to do in the next three years. What's their five-year plan? You've got some companies, they've got 10, 50, hundreds of years plans - I've come across them. If you know what they're trying to achieve, you can put in IT that works.

IT changes all the time, but if they start using a tool and it works for them and it starts to really drive revenue or productivity, we need to know that that's what they want to do. I think those conversations will be important. I think the personal challenge in the business is marketing, marketing, marketing. That has always been my Achilles heel in the business, and actually driving people towards us through getting the message out there.

Maggie, my wife, joined the business last year and she's recently started on using LinkedIn and started to get content out there. We are automating that content going out and then really driving the message forward. We're using marketing as a way to not necessarily just drive sales but put information out there and raise awareness. And make the community aware or the business community in the area aware of the things that are out there.

I recently read 'The Go Giver' and I think there's a really good message in that book of 'giving out and it will come back, but you give out because you want to give freely. You want to do that'. I've always been that sort of person. I was a scout, always helping other people and that is what we do and that's what the business does. It helps.

Getting the message out and having those conversations, that's the challenge of the next year. To make sure people are aware of who we are and what we can do for them. There's a difference between work with Node IT and a difference between working with a support company. Coming to work with use you're not getting a support company, you are getting a partner, a true partner in your business.

RT: I love it and I've got absolutely no doubt you're going to not only personally dealt with those challenges and overcome them as well, but grow the business. I've watched with interest over the past few years since you and I have become friends, watched you grow the business in leaps and bounds, and so glad to see where you're taking it.

It's been an absolute pleasure talking to you. I just know that listeners are to have loads of questions specifically for you, so if anybody wants to continue the conversation with you, how do they find you online?

LW: They can email me. My spelling of my name is Leigh, not Lee. My mum will say to their dying breath, that is the male way of spelling it and I agree with it, because I've got the baby

names book which says it for when I was born! leigh.wood@node-it.com or you can find me on LinkedIn as well - just communicate directly through there.

RW: It's been an absolute pleasure talking to you. Thanks so much for joining us today. For anybody listening today who wants to follow up with any of the things that we talked about, we will include significant amounts of detail and resources in the show notes.