CompTIA

Spotlight on Success

April 2016

Chris Johnson

A Prescription for Success with Healthcare IT

For more than eight years, Chris Johnson, co-founder and CEO of Untangled Solutions, has been focused on delivering his customers a unique user experience. With his business partner Joshua Smith and his team, they have experimented and refined their value proposition over time, eventually leading them to build what has become a strong healthcare IT practice.

What took Untangled Solutions from a traditional break fix shop to a vertical specialization? It all started with one client with an interesting proposition, giving them a proverbial foot-in-the-door that allowed Johnson and Smith's company to become nationally recognized for its healthcare expertise. In this Spotlight on Success, Johnson shares details of their story and provides valuable market insight.

CompTIA: How did Untangled Solutions get into the healthcare IT space?

CJ: It basically started with one medical practice asking us to help them choose an EMR (electronic medical records) solution. This was before doctors' offices really needed them, but this practice saw an opportunity to get meaningful use dollars, so we hopped on the bandwagon to help. They gave us a list of the top 10-20 EMR solutions and asked us to narrow it down to the one they should use.

CompTIA: Have you had to change your focus to achieve growth?

CJ: Although I have not fundamentally changed what we do, our business focus has become clearer. The management team spent a lot of time and effort clarifying what we do well, and importantly, what we don't do. With this understanding we have been able to motivate and unify our team, communicate better with our customers and develop better services.

It took us a couple more years to go all in, starting in 2011. We realized that if we didn't have a more focused approach to the vertical, we were never going to see the success we desperately wanted. We wanted and needed to be seen as the expert, the "go to" IT firm for healthcare. There were not a lot of companies focusing on healthcare early on in the managed services space, so it didn't take long before we were considered experts.

CompTIA: Do you attribute your healthcare success to that first customer?

CJ: No, I don't look at that one medical client as the defining moment in our career. It was the cumulative effect of the opportunity and, later, the investment we put into CompTIA education. At the time, the association was making a push to educate partners about what was happening in the healthcare space.

"You have to be committed to the industry, to learning the terminology and compliance factors. Healthcare is a solid opportunity if you understand how to consult and listen."

I spent seven years doing quality control for a large clinical trial, where I learned a lot about HIPAA and other rules before there was any real enforcement. Josh [his business partner] had a similar background. His mom is a nurse and he worked in public health for a couple of years. And as we started looking at what we'd learned at CompTIA, we realized that not having a vertical focus was really taking away from our ability to provide the services prospective clients are specifically looking for. No one asks if you sell servers.

We do attribute a lot of our success to staying in touch with CompTIA and other organizations that kept encouraging us. There were many times we considered throwing in the towel and here we are in 2016 with a solid business model, and every day we continue to move forward.

CompTIA: What types of support are healthcare customers looking for?

CJ: They have suddenly started to realize they need to invest a lot more in their security and compliance, and gain a greater understanding of their regulatory requirements. We're seeing a trend where more of our perspective and existing clients are asking for real consulting. They want that sit down that says 'I know that I have to do the following things and I don't know how to get there. Can you help me?' I'm not sure what the online search terms would be for that.

CompTIA: Do you still manage clients outside the medical field?

CJ: We did put more energy in targeting the right clients, but we didn't turn down those that weren't squarely in our crosshairs. Non-healthcare clients are often our lab, where we can try out solutions without any compliance consequences if they don't work out.

About 2/3 of our revenue comes from healthcare today. That fluctuates as we take on new clients, but that percentage keeps growing year over year. We do like to keep a little bit of a balance. If, for example, there's a turning point where healthcare suddenly isn't profitable, we need some sort of a fallback. It's a backup plan, of sorts.

CompTIA: What skillsets are required to be a healthcare IT specialist?

CJ: I don't know that it's anything those in IT following industry best practices such as ITIL don't already have in place. It is really more about the knowledge, being able to articulate the rules and regulations and the risks associated with not adhering to them. And being able to break it down for them in such a way that you're not playing the fear-and-threat game.

Your goal is to protect their business, that you have their best interests in mind. It doesn't have to cost a ton of money to ensure your customers are compliant. But it's not easy, either. It's really about understanding and staying up to speed with what is happening with government regulations and all the different nuances when you cross from one state to another. There are 47 states with their own set of privacy laws that, in most cases, are stricter than the federal government's rules.

CompTIA: What are the biggest obstacle to becoming a HIT provider?

CJ: Training, carving out time to get your staff the skills they need. It's not about setting up a firewall, it's definitely more policy driven. That's the types of training and education our staff

goes through constantly, learning how to identify problems in a medical practice and how to fix them before they become real risks.

Medical practices have some unique concerns. A vendor may tell them encryption is a feature of a particular offering, but it's up to the provider to review the details and ensure whether or not it will meet the needs of a medical practice.

CompTIA: What are the major compliance concerns for healthcare IT professionals?

CJ: HIPAA HITEC is the major one, but federal and state security and privacy rules are also important. PCI (Payment Card Industry standard) is another concern, since many practices accept credit cards for patient co-pays.

Compliance is just part of the business process, so we try to put our clients in a position where they don't get all hung up on it. It's our job to read the news and keep abreast of what's happening. I have a weekly standing meeting with several people who are very involved in the industry, including a meaningful use auditor. We're also involved in peer group discussions and ask what others are experiencing in their part of the country. Often times the issues are unique to certain geographic areas. They could have completely different agendas on how they are going about auditing a medical practice for meaningful use or investigating a breach. It's really about keeping your ear to the tracks.

CompTIA: Any additional advice for prospective HIT providers?

CJ: Start by determining whether or not your business has the resources to invest. You have to be committed to the industry, to learning the terminology and compliance factors. Healthcare is a solid opportunity if you understand how to consult and listen. Focus on learning the various frameworks and delivering IT services in accordance with any compliance guidelines potential customers have to adhere to.