CompTIA

Spotlight on Success

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Ian Vickers

Building success with competitive advantage and partnership.

This month we have the pleasure to talk with Ian Vickers of Managed Enterprise Technologies (MET) about how partnership has benefited his business and the exciting journey from the world of professional football to technology entrepreneur.

Founded in 1998, MET took the initiative to adopt emerging technologies which has become the foundation for the company's success, growth and future.

CompTIA: How did you get started in the IT Industry?

Ian: I had a brief introduction to the world of information technology when I was 16 years old and worked for 4 months as a COBOL programmer at Mersey Docks and Harbour Company. 4 months was enough time for me to understand that the combination of COBOL programming, jesus sandals and sideburns was not for me.

I still dreamt of being a professional footballer and so I was lucky enough to fulfil my dream at 17 years old and signed for Preston North End (PNE). (Back in the 80's PNE was still a major football club!)

My dream was sweet but short lived and by the time I reached 21, I ended up having to balance a full time job and playing conference level football. I worked at the local newspaper selling advertising space which I absolutely loved but by the time I got to twenty seven the newspaper industry was changing considerably with the introduction of Apple Mac's.

This was my first real interest in technology and I could see how technology was going to change the landscape of all industries. I moved out of newspaper advertising and into the world of selling IT solutions for a local IT company based in Skelmersdale. Within a week of starting I sold my first Novell network to Ricardo Aerospace and I was hooked. By the time I reached thirty I was appointed Sales Director for a Systems Integrator, based near Preston.

By 1997 at the age of 32 I began developing a business plan for MET and in early 1998 we started the business. The 90's was such an exciting time for Information technology.

CompTIA: Can you provide readers with a quick overview of your business?

Ian: Our proposition is simple – We provide organisations the opportunity to tap into a highly skilled workforce and an expensive management platform at a fraction of the price of doing it themselves. Maintaining IT systems and keeping the lights on requires a wide spectrum of resource and a high investment in management technologies yet we can deliver this service to hundreds of clients and therefore distribute this cost across our client base which in turn significantly drives down the cost to the client.

Like most businesses (particularly in the world of football) wages are the biggest cost to a business and even more so if you want the best people. We like to think that our clients can get a slice of Ronaldo or Messi for a fraction of the cost.

CompTIA: What were the biggest challenges you faced in the early years?

Ian: Stepping out of a large corporation and being part of a start-up was a sobering experience as we found a number of challenges in the early years. These could be as simple as financing larger deals with suppliers, sometimes on personal credit cards, finding new customers and getting our name known within the business community. Building your companies reputation takes time and commitment which can only happen if you do the job well, and offer the right levels of customer service. We were lucky at MET to have a great team that always went the extra mile to please our customers as well as using the right technologies that mitigated the pains the customer was feeling.

CompTIA: Have these challenges remained or have they changed?

Ian: The challenges have changed overtime. Moving the business a number of times due to growth. Recruitment of people particularly in sales continues to be challenging which seems to be a common theme when speaking with other companies. Developing a middle management team is challenging and probably the biggest challenge is the competitive market place. The MSP sector has become far more competitive compared to when we started out and so the challenge is getting our voice heard and finding messaging that will resonate with our prospective clients.

CompTIA: Outside of MET and being on CompTIA's Executive council you also chair Birmingham's Business Crime Steering group, why did you get involved and do you think that this helps with your business?

Ian: I feel that all business owners have a duty to help protect the industry and wanted to give something back. My role exposed me to the types of threats that businesses face, and felt that I could offer guidance and leadership to the group. The group has a great mix of business and representatives from the local police authority and other agencies that works to identify threats and risks to business from all areas not just cybercrime.

CompTIA: What do you think makes MET different?

Ian: A key differentiator is that we started MET as a pure play MSP and so we didn't have any baggage. Lots of our competitors often started out as something else such as maintenance or system integrators but then turned to delivering managed services when margins got squeezed. We developed the business from the ground up with only one focus and that was how could we proactively support IT systems ensuring the highest availability possible and when the systems did fail how could we fix them as quickly as possible. This is our DNA which is ingrained in the culture of all the staff. The level of care we give customers combined with the level of expertise is in my opinion second to none.

CompTIA: We understand that MET embraced and adopted changes in the IT industry very early on – do you think that this has provided you with competitive advantage?

Ian: We do see this as a competitive advantage but more importantly we believe that our

clients can reap the benefits of our skills and knowledge and invest in emerging technologies without often the associated risks of adoption. We hope this gives them a competitive advantage in their own market place and hopefully more success.

CompTIA: What has been the catalyst for growth?

Ian: Quality, Innovation and Intelligence (Qi2) is part of our messaging. Quality of our people, products and services. Continuous innovation in our business to ensure we continue to provide the best services and intelligence, skills and experience of our people delivering our services have all played a major part in our growth.

CompTIA: Have you had to change your service offering to achieve success?

Ian: Not really, obviously technologies have evolved over time and so have standards such as ITIL and ISO9001 etc. However our service offering remains pretty consistent. Clients who have had other managed service providers (MSP) have brought with them expectations of different pricing models but these are just commercial considerations and so we have had to adapt to this.

CompTIA: At CompTIA we often discuss the power of partnerships and believe you have achieved success creating partnerships- can you tell us about it?

Ian: We have been really successful partnering with other IT companies. This has led to some of our largest clients and largest projects. Of particular note we work very closely with another CompTIA member called TIS. They are a specialist network cabling and electrical contractor. We worked together on two flagship contracts The Birmingham Mailbox and The CUBE buildings. Other large projects have followed with new school builds, manufacturing clients and banking. Other relationships have led to delivering services all over Europe.

CompTIA: When it comes to creating commercial partnerships is there any advice you would offer to help members?

Ian: Many IT companies like to think they can do everything so avoid working with companies with this attitude. What happens is that they initially try to do a project, fail and call you in to sort out the mess. This gets repeated as the culture is often wrong at the business.

Find IT companies that compliment what you do or vice versa. Ensure that they have no aspiration to do what you do and vice versa. This will go a long way in ensuring a more harmonious relationship.

Make sure you do your due diligence and make sure they are credit worthy.

Try to work strategically with them on joint marketing initiatives as this demonstrates commitment and should lead to greater understanding of each others strengths and weaknesses.

CompTIA: If you could go back are there any things you would do differently?

Ian: Good question – Yes, not start MET as I am sure my hair would still be brown and not grey!

On a serious note I think we could have been more ambitious at times and ensured that some acquisition opportunities got over the line. Growth is key and being a successful MSP requires size, depth of resource and strong financial strength in order to maintain competitiveness and sustainability.

CompTIA: What do you think the future holds for you and MET?

Ian: We are really excited about the future. We have been developing our cyber threat management capability for some two years now and this is starting to get real traction with our clients. In addition, we have been strengthening our capability with Microsoft Azure, Office365 and Skype for business which also is key to our future development. Furthermore, as we continue to grow so does the size of contract values we are able to win and so this is very exciting.