

CompTIA®



Spotlight on Success

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John Krikke



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From Dot-Matrix Printers to the Cloud: Three Decades of Solutions and Support

When you have been focusing on delivering a quality customer experience and running successful IT businesses for almost thirty years, chances are good there are few problems you have not encountered or helped others work through. That type of experience and knowledge is invaluable in the channel, and John Krikke, Vice President of Onward Computer Systems has given and received his fair share of advice over the years.

What was key to his accomplishments? Krikke shared those details as well as some sage advice for new MSPs in this month's CompTIA Spotlight on Success:

CompTIA: When you were a young boy growing up in Ontario (Canada), what career did you envision for yourself?

John: I really wanted to be a pilot and fly missionaries around in foreign countries. Just light planes, like small Cessnas that I would take to remote places. When I was a kid, the missionary presentations at church really caught my imagination and, though it never happened, I still love planes and flying.

CompTIA: What was your first computer?

John: I got a Timex Sinclair ZX81 when I was a teenager. It was an affordable personal computer you could program and actually do computing with, but it was very basic. We had a few home PCs during the early years, including a Coleco Adam and Texas Instruments TI-99. My dad was a school teacher who was very interested in computers. In fact, at the age of 83, he is still online, using his computer to post on Facebook and access YouTube. That interest in computers seemed to run in our family.

CompTIA: How did that passion influence your career choices?

John: It carried over into high school. I was on the track team and some of the other guys I hung out with were really into computers. Our school had an IBM System/36 (to my best recollection) and my friends knew more about it than the teachers did. While that was always interesting to me, I was planning to become an engineer so I went to university and started off on that path, but that was short-lived. I decided it wasn't for me and decided to get a job working with stereos and cell phones. That was in the early days of mobile, when most of them were really huge. After a while, I realized the stereo business was fun but I was planning to get married and needed a career if I was going to support a family. One of my wife's uncles suggested looking into computers since it was an up and coming opportunity, and he was convinced it was going to be big.

So I started looking around and one of my younger brothers who was also into computers



knew a local reseller who was hiring. I applied and got the job and off we went. That was around 1987.

CompTIA: What were your responsibilities?

John: The company sold Apple-compatible computers and IBM PCs, and later the XT and AT systems. These were the very early days of the PC, which had only been around for a few years. My job was to sell and install, teach people how to use them, and justify why businesses should even buy a computer. That was a big revelation. Could you even use a computer in your business and, if so, what could you use it for? We really focused on how they would make your life easier and create efficiencies for the organization.

Even in those days, I was more interested in the solutions sale, not just moving boxes. The owner was just interested in product sales and I found that to be boring and unfulfilling. I wanted to see the whole lifecycle; talking to clients, figuring out what they needed, coming up with specific solutions and selling, installing, training and supporting them. I wanted to build relationships. Some of those clients from my early days are still customers of mine today. I've run the whole gamut with them, from daisy wheel and dot-matrix printers to the cloud.

CompTIA: How long were you with your first IT employer?

John: Almost 7 years. I ended up being the manager and running most of the operations for the owner, but he was just focused on moving boxes. My interests were more on the solutions sell so I eventually left and started my own company: Krikke Computer Services.

Starting out, I just wanted to do services because the margins were already disappearing in 1993. My original intention was to just do consulting and provide professional services, but I realized people still needed to buy computers, so I ended up supplying those in addition to installation and support. Even back then I was providing an early version of managed support services, taking care of all the computer needs of my client companies. We supplied, installed, supported and then kept all their systems running, including servers.

CompTIA: What were the biggest challenges you faced at that time?

John: The problem was it was extremely difficult to do remote support. The internet was just getting started. You could dial in using modems but monitoring and all the proactive services were really rudimentary back then and very expensive, so most of what we did was onsite and required a lot of driving. Those types of services didn't scale very well, but there was money to be made.

CompTIA: How formalized were relationships in the early days?

John: I started out doing quite a bit of ad hoc work and then realized if I wanted to make it a real business, I had to have contracts. I started putting those in place more than 20 years ago. That allowed me to prioritize which clients got priority with technicians and my own time. I offered the typical bronze, silver and gold levels which, in those days, was more of a block-time arrangement. We moved to an outcome-based, fixed-price managed services contract since then, but in the early days, we provided a certain amount of time over twelve months to take care of all their needs. Most of that time was spent on the break fix side, with consulting, needs assessment and other services mixed in.





Today, we're a strategic partner, the virtual CIO. As our knowledge of their needs has increased, we have more beneficial business conversations. Rather than just supplying computers and showing them how to do word processing, we sit down and talk about their goals and issues before showing them how we can become a strategic technology partner. We might provide them some tools or suggest process improvements, and discuss a variety of different things that will help them take their business to the next level. We're much more embedded with clients today, it's become a real partnership.

CompTIA: When did you get involved with Onward Computers?

John: The company had been in Burlington since 1991 in Burlington (the operation we're in now). Onward was primarily a hardware/software reseller with eight locations across Canada that was owned by a single family in the early days. Once they decided to leave the industry, my current business partner Don Kovacs bought out the remaining portion of the Burlington location (he owned part of it before). He then realized he needed to add services and, since we had worked together back in the '80s, we discussed a merger. We had kept our business relationship and shared work over the years. Since I wanted to scale up my business and he needed to add services, merging the two companies made perfect sense. It gave us the opportunity to mix managed services and large volume product sales. So we got a lot of facetime with vendors and our customers had more to choose from. We leveraged my managed services and his resources, HR and personnel, to scale it out. The merger route was faster and far easier than pursuing an organic growth strategy.

CompTIA: When did you decide to adopt the managed services model, and what was the thought process behind making that commitment?

John: My entry into managed services took place when I left the reseller I was working for back in 1993 and started my own company. The main reason I left was that I wanted to focus more on professional services instead of just doing break-fix. My goal was to do more of what has become managed services. My boss at the time didn't see any value in proactive service, he just wanted to see more and more computers moving out the door. I realized there was more money to be made by maintaining those relationships and providing support services continually instead of starting out at zero each month and trying to sell to meet budget. For me, it was more interesting to talk to business owners and their employees and find out what they were doing, what kind of problems they were having and how we could help overcome those issues with specific solutions. That's more exciting than asking if they'd like to buy 100 boxes this year.

CompTIA: How did managed services automation affect your support programs?

John: Most of what we did in the early days was reactive. If something broke, you got a phone call and would have to go to the client's business to fix it within a certain time. Your SLA typically said how much time you had to get onsite and start addressing their problem. Once RMMs (remote monitoring and management platforms) came on the scene we were able to move from reactive to proactive. Now I was able to get on top of problems before they happened, and could make more money because I reduced the number of onsite calls we had to make.

The major problem with our old-school plan was that it was directly tied to the number of





calls we were making, and how long we were there. The more service calls we made, the more hours we worked and the more money I made. Once the proactive tools came about, we switched all our plans around and sell based on the expectation that their systems would keep running. Infrastructure would remain operational and they'd have all those services available all the time, at a set monthly cost.

That's the transition we made over the past few years: more outcome based conversations instead of reacting to our clients' problems. We ran with the older support plans for a long time, but when we merged businesses with Onward and quadrupled the amount of those plans we had to support, things had to change.

The long-standing model didn't scale out very well because it was still based on how much work we were doing. Once we started using RMM tools, were able to switch to outcome-based plans where, for a fixed fee, we'd keep everything operational. That allowed us to scale out quickly. The better we ran our operations, the more clients we could handle. Managed services gave us more time to do more consulting, and allowed us to focus on becoming the virtual CIO for more of our customers. That created more value add and a tighter engagement with our clients.

As replaced some of our informal plans, we started to do quarterly business reviews instead of occasional "stop and chat about things" sessions. Many of the things we did informally or ad hoc started becoming more formalized. We put a processes in place and built them into actual practices rather than hit or miss procedures.

CompTIA: To what do you credit your process improvement expertise?

John: CompTIA training was really helpful at making me more business savvy. I got a number of Executive Certificates on the business side, and also completed several tech training programs. Those things are important. I have certificates not only from CompTIA, but from other organizations and vendors, too. A lot of us in the tech community are accidental business professionals. Most didn't go to business school and then decide to get into the computer industry. In many cases, our peers were already in the computer industry when they decided to run their own business. That's the type of training we need and we often pick it up as we go.

It's hard to pin our expertise on any single program or community. There are a couple of things I believe are important for MSPs to do and the first is to get involved with associations that can give you a broader view of the industry than vendors and suppliers can. CompTIA is at the top of that list.

Be sure to attend events and talk to thought leaders to get their viewpoints. Sometimes they differ. What one vendor pushes or an organization says may be different if viewed through the lens of another. My philosophy has always been to "go and find lots of smart people and talk to them." So many in our industry are smarter than you are, or have encountered the same problem you are up against. The big difference is they may already have worked through the issue and might be willing to share the solution and mentor you.

CompTIA: Did you have channel professionals who did that for you in your IT career?

John: Yes, I've had a number of mentors, and not just from a business perspective. I had life





coaches and motivators. There are a number of groups that provide that support in the IT industry, including members of the HTG Peer groups who have helped me tremendously over the years.

My first boss was also a mentor. While he was in the stereo industry, not IT, he taught me the value of customer service. By giving clients value, they will be back. How, being an ethical business person, you don't try to make all the money on the first deal. And by treating customers right, providing them with the right solutions, they'll come back. That was our original form of recurring revenue.

Those are the people who taught me key lessons in business. I always say, a day you don't learn anything is a wasted day. There are always new ways to do things, especially in an industry like ours that changes so fast. If you're not curious, you're likely not going to succeed. I think about my dad who, even in his 80s, is still inquisitive and wants to learn. We should never lose that attitude.

CompTIA: What one specific thing has helped you most in the IT industry?

John: I think networking with industry peers was the most critical thing. They hold you accountable, offer some great ideas and help brainstorm concepts. You can meet peers through association and vendor meetings and events, as well as in your own communities.

CompTIA: As a member of the CompTIA Partner Advisory Council, what initiatives have you found most valuable?

John: The Hybrid VAR series project, a series of videos intended to help providers to expand their portfolios, has been near and dear to me. There a lot of resellers who think break-fix services and selling boxes is the only option and we'll show them the benefits of a recurring revenue model and cloud, as well as other services. It's about building value in your business versus just cranking things out the door. Having been a small traditional VAR myself, this initiative is very important to me.

CompTIA: Why do you volunteer to help as a council member?

John: I love to give back. As I said, a number of people have mentored me over the years. And I believe, with thirty years in the business, I have a pretty good perspective on things: from break fix and the early days of the PC to cloud and managed services, as well as strategic partnering. I want to help those who want to be helped and I get to meet a lot of interesting, smart people. The way you improve is to surround yourself with clever individuals.

CompTIA, being a vendor-agnostic industry association, helps a wide variety of businesses and other groups. They have initiatives designed to attract more women and disadvantaged youth into IT careers, and none of their projects are tied to a particular company. The entire industry matters, including vendors, distributors and most importantly, partners. They say a rising tide floats all boats. If you have a strong industry with strong partners and vendors working together it makes life a lot easier for everyone.

CompTIA: What advice do you have for those looking to get more actively involved in the IT industry?





John: Get involved in industry associations. Find causes that are near and dear to your heart that you can volunteer for. CompTIA is a great place to get a broader picture of the industry rather than just your own small part of the market. Go to conferences and interact to learn (and give back). Realize the problems in your business have probably already been solved by someone else. It's just a matter of finding out who came up with the solution and if they will share it. And then, share your successes as well!

