

CompTIA®



Spotlight on Success

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Michael Sirota



“Technology has always been a passion for me.”

Sharp Customer Focus Eases the Managed Services Transition

IT services customers rely heavily on the expertise and commitment of their closest business partners: solutions providers. Near 100% uptime and successful projects have become common business expectations today, meaning that MSPs really have to step up their game to stand apart from the competition. Michael Sirota, Director of Sales and Services for Rational Business Solutions understands that shift, and is helping his team move in the right direction when it comes to setting high client standards. His story is this month's CompTIA Spotlight on Success.

CompTIA: What led you to a career in the IT industry?

Michael: Technology has always been a passion for me. It started in high school where I wrote a software spreadsheet program on a Commodore PET computer with 32 k of RAM that my teachers could use to track student grades for all their different classes. When cell phones came out, I had to have the first one. This continued with computers and any other technology that came along.

I attended the University of Waterloo for accounting and became disillusioned when I was asked to do some things that I found to be unethical. Next, I went to work for McDonalds. I worked in the restaurant business for a very long time, but I always maintained an interest in technology and business. I wrote food cost control and labour control programs that enabled us to achieve higher than industry average profitability and I always pushed the owner to advance technology to better support the business and improve productivity. My restaurant experience took me to Bermuda, where I successfully turned around a failing restaurant again utilizing technology. After returning, I was looking for something new and I was introduced to David Rashkovan, owner of Rational Business Solutions, who was looking for a sales person. Since I'd always loved technology, I thought I would take on this new challenge. That's how I got my first real job in technology.

CompTIA: Tell us about Rational Business Solutions.

Michael: We're a managed services company based in Richmond Hill, Ontario with a majority of clients in the GTA. We also support some clients in Montreal and the US. David started the organization as a one-man shop twenty years ago. He grew slowly until merging with another company nine years ago that nearly doubled the size of the organization and added a large medical focus.

Our business is about 85% managed services, a true outsourced IT department for all of our clients. We provide counseling and guidance for any sort of new technology initiatives, and really try to understand their business, improve productivity and give them peace of mind with their technology. We have eight employees, including five technicians split into two teams. The first



consists of three techs who support the medical clients, since that makes up about 60% of our business while the rest (two technicians) handle the needs of all our other professional office customers.

CompTIA: Tell us about your company's transition to managed services.

Michael: We actually haven't found it to be that difficult. When you build the types of relationships we have with our clients, they will typically respond favourably to anything we ask of them. There's not a lot of questions. They know we have their best interest at heart and we're going to give them great business solutions that fit into their budgetary constraints. We really haven't had a lot of pushback with anything we've tried to move our clients into. The same thing happened with our cloud services transition and more recently, with the addition of business continuity services. These services are now built into our managed services agreements and, if our legacy clients don't have it when they renew, they are strongly encouraged to get it. They typically don't push back.

They can find a box-pusher with cheaper prices elsewhere, and our clients know that. We build a long-term relationship and put their best interests first. That's why it's been relatively simple to move our clients over to managed services.

CompTIA: How about new managed services sales?

Michael: Our closing rate on new business is pretty high since most of it comes from referrals. When you go in with those warm leads, it makes the sales process easier and more successful. In fact, I've found that most of the companies we don't end up closing just aren't ready to make the transition to managed services. They still prefer the break/fix model and, at this point, that's not the way we want to manage our customers.

We still support a few clients with that model, but only those who have been with David for years and aren't ready to make the transition yet. Just last month, we were able to transition one company that had been with us for more than ten years. It will take some time to get all our legacy clients switched over to managed services, but for new business customers, it's the only option.

CompTIA: How did your management role come about?

Michael: After a couple years, our sales were growing and David was considering bringing on a project manager-type person to help run the services side of the business. That got my interest. One of my biggest strengths was management, the ability to work and direct others and to lead projects. That came from my time working in restaurants.

I realized my forte was in the management side of the business since I was not a true sales guy. I'm really not the best person to be knocking on doors and cold calling. I asked David to let me manage both the sales and service employees and hire an admin person to take those tasks off my plate. That person could handle billing, ordering and do the types of things we could easily teach. That freed David and me to focus on other, more critical activities that would impact the management and growth of the business.

That was 2 ½ years ago and it's worked out great. Having the admin person really helped us move a lot of those basic daily activities over so I could focus more on the service side





and manage the sales process, and get more ingrained in the technology. My knowledge of technology was very limited when I first started and I had a steep learning curve to get to the point where I am now very comfortable talking about all types of technology solutions for our clients.

CompTIA: Do you have a “personal philosophy” and, if so, how has it helped your tech career?

Michael: Balance. Whether it is work – life balance or priority balancing or client issues. I try to maintain an even keeled approach. You will not win every time and you cannot get stressed with every situation that may not be going your way. I am a logical thinker and try to really understand any situation with regard to what is really important and what I can let go of. This has helped me in many ways with clients, peers and those I work with.

CompTIA: Any advice to those looking to enter the IT industry?

Michael: There are so many options for those coming into IT today that they have to decide which direction to go. Are you interested in the purely technical side of the business or in a sales/administration/project management role? These are obviously very different and though, at some point, the responsibilities may converge, you still need to pick and prepare a preferred route. The technical side requires a basic set of skills and certain standards you’ll need to meet, such as the CompTIA A+ certification and other accreditations those will definitely help. When hiring entry level technicians, we look at certifications. We want to see that the candidate has at least a basic understanding of technology. We can teach them the rest.

The sales path is quite different. One of the hardest things I had to overcome was knowing little about the technology for business. Do the research to get that basic knowledge. Learn the technology and how it works in business. Sales skills are something you can improve to a certain point, but you have to have the right personality to be able to do that.

