Albert Chou:

This is IT Visionaries, your number one source for actual insights and exclusive interviews with CIOs, CTOs, and CSOs, and many more. I'm your host Albert Chou, a former CIO, former sales VP, and now podcast host.

Michael Cantor:

How do we get rid of all that noise? Have the machine tell us what's wrong with it. That's really where the innovation, and where the idea came from. You just can't achieve the scale we have across all the equipment we have without making a major investment in technology that drive efficiency.

Albert Chou:

Data center efficiency. How about office equipment efficiency? It's really not something people think about, at least not until something goes wrong. And then downtime slows productivity to a halt. On this episode of IT Visionaries, Michael Cantor, the CIO of Park Place Technologies, shares how his company optimizes all facets of data center management, office equipment management, basically anything that you need in your office or your infrastructure that needs service and upkeep, Park Place takes care of it. Find out how they do that from hardware to human capital. It's a huge problem. Give it a listen. My eyes were opened.

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Michael, welcome to the show.

Michael Cantor:

Thanks Albert, great to be here.

Albert Chou:

Everyone wants to know now, what exactly is Park Place, and what do you guys do?

Michael Cantor:

Yeah, so we've coined a particular acronym, DMSO. We're in the Discover, Monitor, Support, Optimize space. And, you know, if you look at traditional companies, you've heard of third party maintenance, we certainly do that. That's the biggest portion of the business, providing warranty support for hardware that may be out of s- out of warranty with a, with a OEM, and those sorts of things. But we also do monitoring and optimization using our ParkView products, uh, which provide hardware monitoring, software monitoring, OS monitoring, and disk monitoring.

Albert Chou:

So just so we, everyone understands, you guys service the equipment that companies have in their data centers? Or, like, what kind of equipment are you monitoring? What kind of equipment are you overseeing?

Michael Cantor:

It's largely enterprise class equipment. Big disc arrays, uh, servers, Cisco networking gear. That, generally laptops, printers, that sort of thing.

Albert Chou:

Got it. These are things that people generally don't know who their suppliers are. I would argue that most people don't know who monitors or overs- you know fixes their stuff in their house. You know, for someone who doesn't know this space very much, they might not be thinking too much about how it innovates, how it needs to keep moving forward, and the progress that happening in it, but I'm already hearing a couple problems. The first thing I hear is, the sheer number of things you probably are overseeing at any given time, and probably your clients' need, and their demand for you to be on top of it. Because I'm sure these customers, if their equipment goes down, they expect you to fix it pretty quickly. Give us an idea of what it means to innovate in this space, and, like, give us a, like, a, like, a window into what the daily operation looks like.

Michael Cantor:

Sure. Yeah. It doesn't sound very exciting off the top of your head, right? It's, it's warranty work. But when you think about the scale we're at, and what we're trying to do for our customers. So today, if you think about kind of a traditional arrangement. You've got your OEM, you're buying maintenance from them. You call them up, tell them you've got a problem. They work with you to try to figure out what the problem, try to figure out how to dispatch the right part, try to get somebody there at the same time. It's a, probably a eight or 12 step process to try to figure out how to get somebody to your operation. So one of the innovative things we've done, is we've figured out how to monitor that equipment so it immediately reports the specific problem, and the specific part that's needed to repair the problem. So instead of calling up on the phone, and going back and forth, and waiting on hold, we know what the problem is the minute it occurs and we dispatch somebody there. You don't even have to call or ask.

Albert Chou:

Oh, so it's proactive?

Michael Cantor:

That's correct.

Albert Chou:

So the way I always explain to someone who's not familiar with the, the major role. Right? CTO, I always say, is often building outward-facing technology, CIO is often building inward-facing technology. It sounds like you would have to build quite a unique system to be able to oversee this much equipment. Talk about, like, steps that you guys to take to, in order to make this even feasible. Because when I think of the sheer number of hardware people possibly have in just one office building, and the sheer lack of knowledge ... That's another thing, the lack of knowledge, because I think to my own office, of course we work hybrid. We also have a HQ. But, like, when things go down, like the printer, the sound audio board, I mean, no one know how to fix it. Like, (laughs) that's like ... And I'm sure most of your clients are in that same boat. Give us an idea of what it took to, I guess, engineer a monitoring solution to oversee all this. Because if you're proactively dispatching people, that means you're really dialed into, like, the performance of this equipment.

Michael Cantor:

Right. Right. And if you think about it globally too, it's massive amounts of data streaming to us at all times. And, you know, some, some equipment is just plain noisy. Right? You may have something going on, it will, it will spew out, you know, 200 alerts that you have to deal with and figure out they're not all, you know ... They're, they're all for the same problem. So we have technology in place that puts, you know, a monitoring, uh, agent, not on every device, but just at one location that is polling across the devices in your organization. It's doing some filtering and basic data manipulation there, so that the stream coming back to our central operations is minimized. Collects that from all over the globe, brings it all back to a central place where we have machine learning in place that monitoring those devices, and highlighting the, the alerts that are important to us, and important to our customers, so that we can work on them proactively.

Albert Chou:

So I'm assuming this is something you had to custom-build. I mean, I, I can't imagine someone built this for you. (laughs).

Michael Cantor:

Uh, it's multiple components. So there is, uh, ex- you know, some commercial software in use, but also our own central Park layer that is translating these alerts, and getting them over to our field service operation. So I would say it's a combo. You know, certainly if you look at IoT, and those sorts of things, we're, we're using some commercial off-the-shelf technology to, to achieve kind of that IoT data stream.

Albert Chou:

Yeah. I mean, I'm kind of just imagining the size, scope, and scale of what you're looking at. I'm trying to for- ... You know, give us an idea. What are some of, like, the biggest challenges you have in maintaining this system? Because off the top of my head, I feel like you mentioned up to 200 alerts for a single problem. (laughs) Like the ability to, uh, diagnose between signal and noise has to be very challenging. What's the biggest challenge to maintaining this system? Because I'm still fascinated by the fact that it leads to a proactive, possibly service visit. Like, that's, that's pretty darn crazy.

Michael Cantor:

(laughs).

Albert Chou:

Like, if you can catch that. You know what I mean? (laughs).

Michael Cantor:

Right. The system itself works pretty well. It's designing for redundancy and scalability that has been the challenge for us. And so, you know, it takes a lot of, of monitoring capacity to manage all this, and we design it for failover for redun- redundancy. So putting all that together and having it work in a cohesive fashion to make sure it's up all the time ... Because it has to be up all the time. Right? You (laughs) can- you can't miss them alerts. Uh, has been the biggest challenge for us, 'cause commercial software needs a little bit of an assist I'll say to, you know, achieve that redundancy that we're looking for, and to react properly, and let us know if a component of the system goes down. Uh, you know, it's like any other piece of software. Things happen, network changes occur, you know, a customer goes offline. We detect

all that, let 'em, and let them know. But i- it, it took a good bit of custom code, and some, some significant architecture to put it all together.

So, for example, we used Azure, uh, to, to put all this in the cloud, because we felt like an on-prem environment for it, uh, was not gonna scale as fast and be as reactive as we need it be, should an incident occur someplace.

Albert Chou:

Yeah. I'm just ... I'm, I'm still thinking about the, the implementation of such a, such a size and scale operation. You mentioned earlier how machine learning or artificial intelligence had helped you, helped the company significantly identify, you know, actual problems versus just signals and beeps that, you know, don't, don't actually amount to anything. Give us an idea of how that evolved, because this is something that is ... You know, obviously AI/ML is relatively gotten ... It's improved so much in the last few years. Right? So I, I'm trying to figure out, like, how'd you do this before? Like, (laughs) it-

Michael Cantor:

Yeah.

Albert Chou:

This sounds, this sounds crazy.

Michael Cantor:

Yeah, I wouldn't say we were using the latest [inaudible 00:08:37], you know, like a TensorFlow or something like that, and try to figure it out. But we've trained the system in our knowledge right across all these pieces of equipment. We know certain pieces of equipment just generate certain types of alerts, and we know that they're repetitive. So our own knowledge, you know, kind of goes into these rules engines that say, "Hey, you know, if you see this again within five minutes, don't alert on that again. Just, just tie it back to the original record." So there's a lot of that programming in place to recognize the variants across this wide breadth of equipment that we cover.

Albert Chou:

And how do you organize your team to handle the changes that are happening? Because I'm sure companies keep upgrading, keep buying new equipment, keep buying different equipment, keep doing different installs to support, like, hybrid work models. Uh, differ- IoT, you mentioned. You name it, someone's putting new stuff in, which means potentially you're getting new signals, or different signals, or things that you just haven't seen before. How do you view, and what's your philosophy on building teams to keep up with this?

Michael Cantor:

Yeah. I mean, there's a couple of angles to that. I mean, first, just from a company structure perspective, we're constantly monitoring the market, and watching what's coming off of warranty, and know what's entering the market. So we have a product management group that is tracking the market, understanding what's coming into market, and helping feed the other groups to deal with it. Field engineers have to know how to repair, you know, that piece of equipment. Our software engineers may need to know how to log on to that equipment and, and take a look through the parameters around it.

We have to write an agent for it. You know, what are the SMP parameters it puts out? So there's a whole infrastructure that we have in place that drives that product management cycle.

The second angle to our support, is that it's not just, you know, the product management group that's driving, you know, proactive management. We have to constantly watch the gear that we're monitoring, and learn from it. So we have a lot of logging that's going on, lot of troubleshooting that's going on, on a daily basis to recognize, hey there's something, you know, about this piece of equipment that we didn't recognize before that we need to adjust the rule space for. So there's this constant reading through the monitoring, extracting the value we can out of all these logs that we're, that we're gathering, and translating that into rules that we need to apply to the system.

Albert Chou:

I'm thinking about the daily activities that are happening in this company. But I'm also thinking about how you have this really unique seat, meaning you have a lot of visibility into (laughs) what is being adopted, what is being implemented, and what's being deprecated. Where do you see companies ... Where are they making new investments? Where have you seen a shift? Because, you know, we've kind of heard about this shift, you know, there's, there's obviously been a major shift over the last two, three years to support hybrid or remote working. Has that actually translated to, like, equipment shifts that you're currently supporting? I'm assuming the answer is, yes. And then after you give your answer, I'm also gonna ask what you see coming down the pipe? (laughs).

Michael Cantor:

Yeah. Yeah, I've seen shifts. You know, certainly cloud had played a big part in it. And we play a big part in people migrating to the cloud. I mean you can't migrate to the cloud in one day. Right? So you're gonna keep that legacy equipment, probably wanna fund that move to the cloud in some way. Right? You're gonna, you're gonna look to cut costs someplace else, so you can move costs towards implementing the cloud. We can help with that in terms of maintenance and helping optimize the workforce that the company has in place. So I'd say that's probably one of the biggest trends.

Now, if you look at the industry shipments, and we kind of watch those numbers all the time, they're pretty flat. It's not like they're declining, but they're not increasing either, so. You know, definitely people are still implementing this gear, people need to keep it longer. Certainly sustainability initiatives are, are, you know, helping people decide, "Hey, I don't really need to throw away that equipment. I should put some maintenance on it from a, from a different provider so that I can maintain it longer than the OEM would like us to maintain it. All those factors come into ... We don't see a big decline in our current market, but we certainly, you know, help and can maintain, and all that monitoring that I've described can be done in the cloud too, for cloud assets.

Albert Chou:

How about the actual repair of things? Because I was thinking about ... I worked at a networking company, and, you know, our networking team could solve some networking and switch problem remotely. They could solve it via software. Can the modern problems be solved via software? I know there's certain things that you have to re- you know, physically go there, and probably, possibly serve it on a physical basis because you need a part or component. What percentage of problems are now software-based versus, uh, physical hardware-based?

Michael Cantor:

Yeah. I would say for us it's still a lot of physical hardware. I mean, a failure in the equipment is what we're really looking for. Maybe, you know, entire replacement of a piece of gear or, or part of a gear. You know, software support still typically tends to fall to the OEM. Like, if you have a problem with a Windows machine and, and something has gone wrong inside Windows, and it's not letting people log on. Typically not a hardware sort of thing, and typically not something we would deal with.

Albert Chou:

Are you seeing things also to help you better serve in the field? Or are seeing, like, different innovations, technological innovations, software-based innovations that are helping your field agents get better, faster, more accurate service?

Michael Cantor:

Yeah, definitely. I, I, I would say we haven't implemented it yet, but we're certainly looking to things like augmented reality. So, you know, not everybody knows every piece of gear across the face of the earth. Right? But there are cl- closest person to that, you know, piece of gear that's malfunctioning, may not have that expertise. So our ... What we've been trying to figure out, is how do we get somebody there who can tie back to the central, you know, whoever's got the most expertise, and kind of walk 'em through it. Hey, don't touch that wire, (laughs) touch the, the ... Don't touch the red wire, touch the blue wire, you know, kind of thing.

Albert Chou:

(laughs) Hopefully it never gets that intense.

Michael Cantor:

Yeah. And we believe that augmented reality will help with that. So there's certainly a whole set of things like that. You know, dispatch technologies, routing technologies, we have all those in place to make sure people, the right person's dispatched on the most, you know, on the best route. All those sorts of things. I think that's pretty typical today. But definitely some things coming down the pipe that we think will have an impact on our, on our field service.

Albert Chou:

Yeah. I'm just thinking about this is, this, your company is, like, half logistics company, 'cause you're sending field technicians to places, like you just said, all over the world. So you're part logistics company, but you're also a software company, because you had to build your own monitoring systems to track all this stuff. And you're doing this all in the (laughs) like ... Uh, obviously your customers know who you are, they need you. But like, most of the market doesn't know who you are. How did you get into this space?

Michael Cantor:

Well, it's the whole thing. You know? And, and the reason we coined the DMSO term, right, so we worked with Gardner, because Gardner said, "Hey, this is, this is something we've never seen before. This is a new entry in a category that doesn't exist, and so what do we call this? And that's where DMSO came from. I mean, it really all built from, you know, just scaling up in the third party maintenance arena. Right? You know, we were looking for ways to become more efficient, and that grew into the monitoring. So, you know, again, going back to the puzzle. Hey, it takes 12 steps to figure out how to

deliver a part and get the right part there, and avoid all the mistakes that occur when somebody transposes a part number, or reads it incorrectly over the phone. How do we get rid of all that noise, and get it down to just tell us ... You know, have the machine tell us what's wrong with it. That's really where the innovation came from, and where the idea came from. You know, you just can't achieve the scale we have across all the equipment that we have without d- making a major investment in that sort of technology that drive efficiency.

Albert Chou:

Okay, what you just said had kind of scared me, because, uh, if, uh ... For those listening who didn't quite take that piece out. Prior to having automation, or some type of software level component that let's you know that what hardware has failed, you were dependent on somebody reeling their part number to you.

Michael Cantor:

That's right.

Albert Chou:

Or model number of their ve- the device. They'd be like, "Hey, this is in a QX200." (laughs) And you'd be like, "Oh, okay, this is the part." And it was wrong. It's like, "Oh, okay." (laughs).

Michael Cantor:

That, that absolutely occurs. I mean, even we, we don't have every brand monitored. Right? Everybody is at different levels of comfort with that technology, different modes of operations. So we still have plenty of people calling support, you know, and telling us, "Hey, this machine has dumped this output to us." We say, "Send us the logs." And we try to read through it. But, you know, on occasion someone says, "Got a hard drive that failed." "What size hard drive do you have in there?" "120 GB." Send it out. "Oh, wait a minute, you know, it's, it's 200GB."

Albert Chou:

(laughs) Yeah, I can see that happening a lot.

Michael Cantor:

Yeah. And all this is around trying to make that more efficient and remove that. Uh, you know, and, and it helps you from ... It helps the company from a person perspective too. Right? Your team doesn't have to spend time walking up and down the aisles looking for things, dumping logs out, sending logs out, getting on the phone and waiting on hold for somebody. You know, it's all right there and ready to go. Your team is that much more efficient when, when you have that monitoring in place, and we're proactively fixing the equipment.

Albert Chou:

Oh, man. I always think how defensible companies are. 'Cause, uh, I used to read a lot of Warren Buffett, and ta- you know, he talks about moats. And I'm thinking right now, like, man if you were to do this, meaning if a new incumbent was to say, "I want to, I want to p- compete with Park Place," just the sheer number of parts and components you would have to carry of stock and replenishment for is, is pretty mind-boggling. Because in the world of retail, for example, you can actually, let's say, centralize

products. Like, you kind of know, for, for example, Home Depot kind of knows that snow shovels aren't needed in Florida. So it's, like, snow shovels can be stored up there. But you're servicing who knows how much equipment (laughs) all around the world. So are you in charge of building systems to track all the parts you need?

Michael Cantor:

Oh, absolutely. Yeah. I mean we, basically we use off-the-shelf technology to do that too. But we have warehouse management systems, we have demand planning and replenishment systems all looking at what's in use, and what's needed, and what's under contract, to come up with the right parts in the right place at the right time.

Albert Chou:

I mean that's ... It is crazy to think that this, (laughs) what this entails.

Michael Cantor:

Yeah. On that, I meant to add, you know, just think about the years of experience. Right? I mean, you can train yourself how to repair Dell equipment, but we've got people who've got years, and years, and years of experience who know every trick of the trade. And we've, you know, encapsulate that in the systems where we can, that knowledge, so that we're fixing the right thing at the right time.

Albert Chou:

Oh, yeah. Uh, this is, this is fascinating stuff. For yourself, how did you get into this space?

Michael Cantor:

Uh, it's funny. I grew up a healthcare person. Right? So, I'll skip the whole kind of career background and say just before I came to Park Place I'd been in healthcare for 20 years. You know, something along those lines. Uh, and, you know, you, you create these networks and connections and, you know, had a CEO, had I worked for at one time who said, "Hey, you know ..." Chris Adams who's the CEO of Park Place was looking and said, "Hey Chris, I know, I know just the guy for you." And Chris just called me out of the blue one day. And, you know, I don't typically take those calls, but the network, you know, the other CEO called and said, "Hey, you should really listen to this guy." Uh, and I did. And do you know, again, I, I kind of walked in and had heard, yeah, third-party maintenance. Sounds, you know, (laughs) sounds pretty mundane, right? But then Chris explained the vision and, and what he was attempting to accomplish. And I was like, "I've never heard of this before. I think this is something different. And I, I want in on that." So that's how I, that's how I got into it.

Albert Chou:

I guess how many customers did you serve when you first joined there? Uh, uh, we're looking at your LinkedIn right now. Looks like you joined, uh, Park Place in 2018.

Michael Cantor:

Right.

Albert Chou:

How many customers did you serve? Because right now it says in your LinkedIn slug that you guys serve 21,500 customers.

Michael Cantor:

Yeah, it's basically, you know, depending on what metric you look at, you know, revenue or customers, it's either doubled or tripled during that period of time. Uh, uh, and if you look at the IT team, the IT team itself when I, when I got here was 55 people. Now it's 125.

Albert Chou:

And how about the equipment you support? Is it, has it expanded, or has it contracted? Have there been, like, players and equipment that have won market share, and like, kind of consolidated into, like, this is like ... Yeah, like phones. Right? Like, the iPhone had kind of taken over. Or that it's actually splintered, like there's even more skews and things that you have to support.

Michael Cantor:

It's expanded. You know, as we've acquired other companies who had different capabilities, and different expertise, our space has just expanded. And if you think about it, I mean, we're maintaining some hardware that's 20, 30 years old. You think about all that history.

Albert Chou:

God.

Michael Cantor:

And the need to maintain it. You know, it's ... It would take a long time to, to leave, you know ... Even though there is consolidation in the industry, it would take a long time to remove all, all that old hardware out of the industry and, and not require support for it. I don't know what the oldest piece of gear we su- we, uh, we support is, but I certainly have been ... It's interesting, we r- we run big labs so that people have a chance to practice on these machines. And so we kind of have one of everything.

Albert Chou:

(laughs) How do you get parts for something that's, uh, 30, 35, maybe 40 years old?

Michael Cantor:

Our procurement supply chain guys are amazing. They, they [inaudible 00:20:48].

Albert Chou:

(laughs).

Michael Cantor:

They know when, when equipment's being decommissioned. We survey our professional services arm that helps with equipment decommissioning, and they're, they're watching for the right stuff at the right time. And it's pretty amazing. You walk in one of those things, and you look at the kind of the museum collection that's in there some time. Like, I certainly know in our Westboro facility there's a ... It's not a PDP, it's a, it's one of the OpenVMS servers, but the alpha server is sitting in there. And I, I've always got

my eye on that thing, you know, wondering when it, when, wh- (laughs) when its last day will be. Somebody out there is still running, you know, DEC Alpha OpenVMS servers.

Albert Chou:

I don't know what that is, but if you're, if you're, (laughs) if, if you're surprised how old that is, then I'm trying to picture what, how old that, (laughs) that is.

Michael Cantor:

Okay, so I'm getting, I'm giving away my age a little bit, I suppose. Those were really cool (laughs) back in my day.

Albert Chou:

(laughs) Oh, man. Michael, man, it was awesome having you on the show, and kind of sharing this world of DMSO, is the official, I guess category name now that the market or industry has now named it. Like you said, it's one of those indus- industries that, that now that we hear it, and of course the audience hears this episode, they're going to obviously recognize that this is necessary. Right? Who is gonna maintain all this equipment? We have facilities management for just about everything, our computers, our gear. It's not something, like, what I really even thought about. I just, like, you know, who ... Like, it would, it, I mean, makes total sense now that (laughs) I hear, I'm hearing it from you. I was, uh ... I don't even know why, I guess we just assumed it was more like our general appliances, you just call the appliance repair guy, or the manufacturer, or the OEM, they would come fix. But it sounds like that's not, that's not a good process at all, because of the fact that you can't have downtime. It was awesome having you on the show, man. I really appreciate you kind of sharing what the company does, and, uh, yeah, giving us insight into this industry.

Michael Cantor:

Yeah, no. I'm very happy to do it. And, and like I say, it turns out to be much more exciting than it sounds (laughs) on the outside.

Albert Chou:

No doubt about it. Well Mike, it is time for the lightning round. The lightning round is brought to us by Salesforce platform. The Salesforce platform is the number one cloud platform for digital transformation ever experienced. Mike, this is where we ask you questions outside of the world of work, so our audience can get to know you a little bit better. Are you ready?

Michael Cantor:

Fire away.

Albert Chou:

All right. What is the most difficult IT problem you think you've had to solve in your career?

Michael Cantor:

It's all in healthcare. Healthcare is amazingly complex. And so there's all these little variations to it. So I was among the first to auto-adjudicate claims. And you think that sounds pretty boring too, but, you

know, applying technology to figure out how to au- automatically process a claim and come to decision, you know, I was in the middle of all that. And that was a tough problem to solve.

Albert Chou:

Growing up, or your professional career, did you ever have a mentor that really changed your trajectory of your, uh, career?

Michael Cantor:

Yeah, there's probably been lots of inflection points. I would say, you know, on the, on the road to CIO, I would, I would name a good friend of mine, uh, Chote Sudarshan. He started in IT as kind of a ... Uh, what's the best way to put it? Uh, kind of a nerd leader. Right? And you don't realize all the kind of human touch that's necessary for it. And so, you know, I was on the path of ... Hey, I, you know, I started out a developer, you know, and gone through the ranks. And didn't really understand kind of the human side of it. Chote really, you know, taught me that, and, and it's made a big difference in the way I operate.

Albert Chou:

That's awesome. What do you like to do outside of work?

Michael Cantor:

My wife and I are huge hikers. Kids are grown and out of house, and we are just all over the world hiking wherever we can find a spot.

Albert Chou:

When you say hiking, what kind of hikes are we doing? Are we talking mountains? Are we talking about rivers and forests? Wh- where are you hiking?

Michael Cantor:

Uh, typically mountains, you know, distance not height. Right? So trying to get in 10, 10 miles, that sort of thing.

Albert Chou:

Have you ever come across a mountain lion?

Michael Cantor:

I have not, but we're from Arizona, so we've come across plenty of rattlesnakes.

Albert Chou:

No, dude. Dude. (laughs).

Michael Cantor:

[inaudible 00:24:24] in Iowa, less pleasant.

Albert Chou:

(laughs) Oh man, I don't like snakes. (laughs).

Michael Cantor:

You definitely don't like 'em rattling at you from, from a foot away.

Albert Chou:

(laughs) Oh. Well Mike, man, I appreciate you joining us today on IT Visionaries. Thanks for sharing what you do at Park Place Technologies. Thanks for sharing your love of hiking. And, uh, you kind of hit a sore subject that many of our CIO, CTO friends from the medical field have talked about, which is the, the challenges that are in that field. So not, uh, surprised that you served in that field. I think that's where the hardest problems are, (laughs) existed.

Michael Cantor:

Well you're welcome. Pleasure talking to you.

Albert Chou:

Awesome. Thanks for joining us today on IT Visionaries.

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