

IT Matters Episode 37

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SPEAKERS

Aaron Bock, Keith Hawkey, Shane Creech



Aaron Bock 00:00

Op Welcome to the IT Matters podcast hosted by Opkalla. We're an IT advisory firm that makes technology easy for your business. Our vendor neutral technology advisors work directly with your team to assess technology needs and procure the best IT solutions for your organization. On this podcast, expect high level expertise from our hosts, plus experience driven perspective from the leading experts on topics like AI, cyber security industry focused IT solutions, strategy and more. Now let's get into today's discussion on what matters in it,



Keith Hawkey 00:38

and welcome back to the IT Matters podcast hosted by Opkalla. At Opkalla, we help IT teams understand the busy marketplace of technology strategy and services with a data driven approach. On this podcast, we invite technology leaders to discuss the challenges facing the modern IT department. My name is Keith Hawkey, technology advisor at Opkalla, and today we are joined by Shane Creech, who is currently the Vice President of Information Technology at OB hospitalist group, where he leads enterprise technology strategy across clinical operations, infrastructure, data security and innovation. Shane has guided organizations through cloud first transformations, major interoperability shifts and even national scale cyber events. What makes Shane's perspective especially valuable is that he's done this work across nearly every IT leadership seat, CIO, VP of IT infrastructure, cloud leader spanning health care, higher education. He's led service desk in sourcing and built enterprise analytics teams from scratch, constantly bridging the gap between technology and the business it serves. Today, we'll talk about what it actually takes to lead it in high stakes environments, how technology leaders should think about cloud AI and resilience right now, and what Shane has learned when the pressure is real and the lights have to stay on. Shane, welcome to the podcast.

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Shane Creech 02:19

Thank you, Keith. It's fantastic introduction. It certainly sounds possibly more awesome than maybe reality is. But thank you so much for having me.

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Keith Hawkey 02:30

It's definitely a pleasure. But before we get into the meat and potatoes of things, we have a little game that we typically play. It's a little more light hearted. Have you ever played true truths and a lie?

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Shane Creech 02:46

Personally, probably not. But have I been in social settings where we have played absolutely well?

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Keith Hawkey 02:54

This is a two truths and a lie based on the most recent ces event, computer, consumer electronics, not the S stands for, you know, the big event they have where there's a bunch of innovative consumer Toys and electronics. So I'll list three different possible electronics that were there, and I'll see if you can guess the one that is completely fabricated,

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Shane Creech 03:29

fantastic. All right,

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Keith Hawkey 03:31

all right. So first is in emotion sensing car horn that adjust adjust honk, volume and tone based on whether you're angry, passive, aggressive or just exhausted. Impressive. That is number one second a baby panda robot named on on a cuddly robot, pet designed to respond to touch and provide companionship for older adults. Blending cuteness with assistive tech, and number three is a Lego smart play brick, a real two by four Lego brick with sensors, lights and sounds, interactivity, bringing physical play into the smart era. So we've got a motion sensing car horn, a baby robot that consoles and a panda robot that assists the elderly, and a Lego play smart brick.

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Shane Creech 04:48

Those are good, so I'm gonna go for the one that seems least plausible, at least to me, because I don't see the practical. Goodness for humanity, I'll go for the motion sensing car horn,

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Keith Hawkey 05:04

as much as I would love for that to be true. That was a completely fabricated device that I made up. However, wouldn't it be fun to be on the road and you hear the different car horns based on the actual emotional disposition of each driver,

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Shane Creech 05:23

yeah, yeah. I This will probably give away a bit, at least in the era I grew up. But they used to have in in older cars, you could have like a multi tone horn, or a horn that would play like a like MIDI music style of tone. So you could essentially select, you know, one or three different type of honk types. So, I mean, the technology has actually been there for probably quite a quite a time.

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Keith Hawkey 05:55

Yeah, speaking of quite a time, you've spent quite a time in IT and technology. Shane, how did you begin this career? What were the early beginnings? How did you become a practitioner in the space? Oh, so

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Shane Creech 06:10

probably an interesting story of coming into it. And, you know, blends into, you know, as you said, now I'm in healthcare. It for most of my adult life now, but when I was coming up through high school, I really it wasn't much of a thing people invested in. You know, there wasn't a lot of technology really integrated within business. You know, the old the old times, when it started off as, you know, you'd probably find it some executive spaces, you know, people maybe did some financial trading or watched, you know, financial markets, you know, did some basic, we'll call computer asset tracking stuff and ordering and and things like that. So, you know, much to a lot of people's, I think surprise when they find out about my career is, I thought I was going to be a medical laboratory technician. That's, you know, I was 100% convinced that that was my future. You know, having an engineering background and just an innate curiosity in that space that really seemed like it was a great fit. I found out real early I'm not one for blood, so Medical Laboratory Technician wasn't really a great fit for my future. But what, what I did see in that space was there was a whole lot of technology back stuff, and just, I think, in leading up to that, really got involved in and working with people in high school doing bulletin board systems and early communication systems, and really cultivated a community of, you know, just learning and and early computer science stuff that, to me, was like a whole brand new world of fascination and excitement that also kind of, I think, sparked that engineering mindset. And, you know, as I tend to tell people, the rest is history, and I just kind of jumped full force into it. And there really wasn't a technology that, you know, I was exposed to, or that would come up, that, you know, I wasn't fascinated by. It. Just couldn't, you know, help myself to learn more.

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Keith Hawkey 08:22

Yeah, I mean, that's, that's a lot of the IT. Leaders that we have on actually had some varied beginnings that stumbled into it. You know, it's funny enough. We actually have a lot of people on that came from a military background, and that's and they dealt with military technology, and that's how they move themselves into the private enterprise of it. And it is interesting how a lot of paths lead this direction, considering of how important it is to organizations to have competent people. They keep the lights on, really, and they're the backbone to their organizations. You've spent some time in healthcare over the last few years. What is? What is something that about being an IT leader in healthcare that people outside of the role don't almost never understand?

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Shane Creech 09:19

Yeah, that's a great question. And kind of, as you dissect that and think about it, you know, I think something that comes to mind really is, you know, it's, it's my history within the role, because it's, it's greatly changed over the years. So how I probably would have answered that, you know, a decade or two ago is vastly different than how I'd answer it today, but probably in the most common way I'd say, you know, most people probably think healthcare, it is, you know, the same as, you know, whatever they think it is anywhere else. And you know, it's really about, you know, data protection, keeping the lights on. You know. System uptime, right? That's probably, I'd say for years, that's really what it teams were measured against. You know, you're a successful team if you did keep the lights on, and if the system was always available for the user to interact with the system and do whatever, you know, whatever thing that system actually provided for the organization in the healthcare space. I think the thing that's greatly different when you think about that question is, you know, you could have the system there, it could be on, people can interact with it. And that's, that's actually like the table stakes of the job. So that's, that's not the importance. That's certainly not how you know, any of my past employers in the last 10 years have actually measured, you know, success of any IT team I've led. It's really about, you know, today, being able to help the users unlock the functionality within the technology so that it becomes a tool that enables them to get, you know, either more done meet, you know, increasing demand and capacity, get work done faster. Perhaps, you know, it's, I think, when I think about that question, it's, that's probably the the interesting piece, because, if I was in manufacturing, it it probably, quite simply, is, you know, the system just has to be up, because if the system's up, then we're, you know, we're generating whatever out the back end that that is counted as success. But in health care, that's, that's just vastly different. And I think for anybody that's not in health care, just the depth and complexity of a regulated environment is probably something you know would be, yeah, you don't understand it, probably, until you have to live with it or live in it,

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Keith Hawkey 11:51

yeah, yeah, that, that makes a lot of sense. I mean, you, you've probably experienced what, what we would call a bad day in, bad day on the job and with your tenured career, I'm curious, of like, what, what is a How does a bad day look today compared to what it did 510, years ago? And any, any war stories that that nit leader that maybe hasn't gone down your path, but they can learn from that resonates with you?

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Shane Creech 12:28

Yeah, absolutely. So, you know, I just kind of hit, I think, the front end of that question, and think about again, 10 or 15 years ago, a bad day might have been, geez, there was a, you know, a system outage that lasted a day, maybe three days, you know, maybe, in real bad case, maybe it lasted for a week, you know, and that was, that was your bad day, or or set of bad days together, not that that wouldn't be catastrophic today, because it certainly would. It wouldn't make for a great day, but I think, to a greater degree, a bad day, and in modern times really isn't so much again about keeping, you know, keeping the lights on simply, it's, you know, a bad day is really defined by, did I bring the right, you know, technologies forward to the business that actually solved the problem, you know, that they're trying to solve. And probably even more importantly than that is, you know, I could probably solve any business problem with a dozen technologies, but some technologies, frankly, require the business to change, you know, work dynamics or workflows in order for them to unlock the value of the technology. So, you know, I'd probably quantify, you know, today's bad day would be if I didn't put in the hard work, I think, to understand what the business is trying to accomplish. And, you know, led them down a bad path, or a bad investment in technology, that's a bad day in how I would look at it today, just simply from the impact perspective of it's it may be a bad day today, but I'm going to continue to live with the result of that bad day for, you know, maybe the next five years, if it was a sizable investment, they're not going to reinvest. We're gonna have to figure out, or try to figure out, how to make it work. So I think that's, you know, it's a complexity problem, and that's, that's how I would think about the bad day today, yesterday. It was just, you know, it was today. Was it a good day today? Did the system stay up today and today? It's the, you know, the vast difference is, well, did I actually understand what you needed? Because if I didn't it, it's more than a bad day today. It's a bad day for the next five years, 36

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Keith Hawkey 14:53

months of bad days, or 60 months of bad days. Yes, and reminders. Reminders of a previous time, reminders of an evaluation,

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Shane Creech 15:05

yeah, and, you know, and to bring that out into practical sense, into the second part of your question, you know, I, I could probably go back as early as just talking with different folks about, you know, cloud ambitions, you know, just to kind of get into the hype cycle, you know, Cloud has kind of started, I think, to come off the backside. Most people, you know, see SAS Infrastructure as a Service is just normal courses of doing business. But back in the early days when that began, you know, most businesses kind of like al today, you know, boards got hit to executive teams of, hey, I think this is a great way to save money on this. It spend, you know, let's, let's go to the cloud. Everybody's doing it, right? So a lot of people ran full force into, let's do the cloud, cloud everything. And, you know, I would consistently talk to folks that, you know, were kind of in the beginning, mid part of their journey. Maybe they had had some starts and stops, but they were starting to kind of feel the bad day scenario, right? Because they're like, I'm not seeing that. This is going to save money. This is what they wanted me to do. Was to do this because they were going to save money. But I'm not realizing savings. So, you know, when I think about it in a practical sense, of, you know, turning that into, you know, a real, tangible story. That was one where I, you know, I'd say, if you didn't, if you didn't understand how the technology is used, how you would apply it, you know, to the problem, you know, save money, you could end up with some really unintended results. And, you know, the big thing in the cloud space that become, I think, interesting, you know, hindsight 2020, was really that cost savings didn't materialize because, you know, again, the pace of the business continued. It did allow IT groups to service the business in a much quicker manner. But what really happened in in respect to that is the business became Ultra consumers. So instead of the old pace that was kind of hampered by the traditional purchasing process, and, you know, buying hardware, racking and stacking hardware, getting it ready to go, putting an application on it. I mean, all that used to take months. So it would, you know, in essence, create a little bit of an artificial roadblock for the business going extremely fast or spending money really quickly. The cloud era, you know, took that from months to literally hours, sometimes just days. So then the pace that you know, the organization could spend money just Quicken. So in most organizations, really, that realization was they intended to save money, but what they didn't do is really look at the process around implementing the technology and what that caused, and that's how most people ended up actually burning through what they thought was a cost savings, just simply by just consuming more.

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Keith Hawkey 18:06

You know, this is the potential graveyard for so many IT leaders today that it's, it's one of those roles that you're, you're into, you're intricately tied to the technology the business operates on. You're in charge of understanding brand new revelations and technology revolutions. Cloud was one of those revolutions at the time. You know, you're not very well equipped to have all of the insight into how this, how this works, especially five years ago, especially seven years ago. So there's a lot of IT leaders that went by the wayside that, you know, they're blamed for potential mistake. And they went, you know, the vendor was, had all these ROI documents and how they're going to save this amount of money. And they had, they made it sound so, so nice. It just reminds me of, because I exist in the partner space. My day job of trying to, trying to cut through some of the salesmanship that happens because, because I've seen many it, leaders kind of live and die by these, these poor decisions that get locked in long term contracts, and like you said, it's a spigot that sometimes only goes one way with Cloud spend. I see this paradigm reinventing itself within the generative AI space today. I mean, it's going to be the exact same cycle. It's even more complicated than shifting your infrastructure to basically just another data center that has a different cost model. It's it's unproven. I see it constantly. Actually, I think most organizations are still fairly tepid around making big investments. They really want to start extremely small, so at least that's helpful, but it's, it's, it's going to be another one of those cycles where there's going to be a lot of IT leaders, either they're made or unmade, within this hype cycle of AI,

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Shane Creech 20:17

yeah, for sure. Yeah. I think that's probably been the majority of my conversations the last two years, specifically, again, just coming from the cloud space and watching that paradigm happen. And I'd say there's some important learnings to not end up in. You know, I used to be an IT leader category, and that's and that's really, I think, if you shift out of, you know, I just the pressure cauldron, you know, the board says, I need this thing that's, that's fantastic. But, you know, you work in the partner space, and you know this as well as anyone, it's like, well, let's, let's dive into that. So you want it. Let's define what the want actually is. What are you trying to achieve? You want? AI, but what's the business value proposition that's going to be created here? And then, you know, again, I think, start to dissect that, come to that mutual understanding of, okay, so this is what we're working towards, is the value proposition we're going to try to drive, from a business value proposition perspective, not, you know, it up time or, you know, something that doesn't really matter, but this is the thing we're going to chase, you know, to use it in the cloud space. Let's say it was cost savings, because there were people that did save money in cloud. And here's how they did it. Because I, you know, I helped people do it. I'm sure, in the space, you know, if you were in the partner space at that time, you probably also witnessed people did save money. And the way they did it is, okay, we're gonna save money. That's, that's kind of the business value proposition. And then, you know, you break down like a partner does is, let's understand everything that drives cost. So then you, you know, you go through the pain of documenting all of that stuff that drives the cost in the cloud space. And you know, you come up with a fairly extensive list, and a lot of that stuff is just, you know, it's process, it's procedural. Of course, there's technology, there's people, there's all of that kind of stuff. And then, you know, and then you actually make the moves to start enacting change, and a lot of it has nothing to do with technology change, for as cool as it sounds, a lot of its process and people. So you make those process and people changes, and then, yeah, then you make the small adjustments. As you see the value prop either come to

life, you know, either I'm spending a little bit more, I'm spending a little bit less. The people that didn't end up spending more ended up adopting things like, I have a test environment that I only turn on because I test one time a year. So, you know, in my old IT environment that was a piece infrastructure, I just left it on. In the cloud environment, I could turn it off and not pay for it. So the operational paradigm shift was turn it off and then money savings happens. So, you know that that's just, that's just a real simple example. I think, you know, when you apply it to the cloud space, I see the same thing really happening in the AI space today. You know, really comes into it's like, well, AI can do a lot of things. What are we want it to do? And what? What I've commonly told people today, because I've heard, I've heard some people say, well, there's, there's this notion that we can, you know, save money with people. You know, we can, we can get rid of people, or somehow supplant people with AI technology. And you know what? I think the early goers that have kind of pushed hard into that space have found out really quickly, just like early cloud adopters, is you can, but it's, it's not really the core application or the benefit of applying that particular piece of technology. It's really, you know, it's more about speed. It's amplification of existing skill sets, you know, it's, it's everything, really, but replacing people. So if you're a growing organization, and your growth curve has been to put more people at growth, yeah, you can apply AI in the in the people savings aspect, more than likely, you know, to automate process and people type of tasks, and then you can kind of bend the curve. You're going to spend a portion of that savings in, obviously, the technology to make that amplification, but you should probably realize in that savings over, you know, salary benefits, for instance. So I, you know, when I when I think about what's going to separate the. People that are, you know, tomorrow's, you know, leaders that are going to be cheered in the hallways for helping an organization really take this maddening, you know, AI drum beat that's probably coming out of the boardroom in the executive team conference room. It's really going to be those people that can lean in, understand and deconstruct, really, what's the business, you know, business value proposition we're trying to drive and then be that constant partner. So you can't take the order, you know, in the classic sense, like we used to 20 years ago, go in the back room, work for months, and then generate the thing and go, ta, da, because the business probably has gone to made five or six iterations in that time period that you've been in the back room. So everything has to be done in the front room, you know, constantly iterating, you know, kind of getting in that fast Dev, you know, hyper improvement mindset, and constantly making small iterations. And I think the folks that do that and navigate it more from a partner mindset are going to be highly successful. Yeah.

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Keith Hawkey 26:07

I mean, you interact with, with the boardroom, with, with the leadership committee that is in charge of the business direction quite often. What are you hearing? What do you think the disconnect is between what a board of directors thinks AI should do and what is feasible in the near term, like, what, what are some of these grand ideas that maybe you've heard, and how do you bring them down to a consumable? You know, low hanging fruit, you know, a landing place without putting the company too much at risk. Like, do you have any experience with with that paradigm?

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Shane Creech 26:50

Yeah, yeah, this is gonna, it's gonna sound really dorky, Keith, what I'm gonna say? It comes down to me, it comes down to metrics that matter. And here's how I'll bring it to life. You know, I'll talk about cloud because, you know that may be more applicable to some people in recent memory, and also AI, but you know, in the cloud space in the early going, really, the metric that people thought mattered was how much of your, you know, IT infrastructure portfolio or app portfolio was in the cloud. The higher the number, the better that was. That was the false metric. So that was the metric most people who ended up failing. That's the one they chased. Yeah, all aspects, you know, everything be damned. Get everything into the cloud. You know, the higher the metric, the better. And it simply wasn't the case. I think when you kind of look at AI and it's really kind of come up even internally to our conversations real early on, you know, we had a metric that went to our board, and it was, it was really just, you know, kind of an inventory or account of, you know, well, how many AI things are you doing and, and that was the metric, you know, early on that mattered, because if, if that number was, you know, low, it was, well, you're not doing Enough. If that number was really high, it's like, oh, well, you must be, you know, you must be really forward thinking. You must be out there doing great things, you know, and and what I, you know, what we've shifted from in that space is, you know, we've, we've kind of pulled back. I have, like, a top three to five opportunities, you know, where we can apply AI to help our organization, and that's really what we track to. It's like, what's, what's the progress on those things? And let's talk about what we've learned. I mean, there have been some things we thought we were going to get business value out of, you know, those things have come true. There's been, obviously some things that we thought we were going to get business value out of. And, you know, real early on, it's like, well, that's, it's, it's not really taking hold. We're not seeing it. So then, you know, when I talk about those micro corrections, you know, that's, that's when you have honest conversations and you say, Is it, is it possible to achieve this with this particular technology? Are we thinking about it correctly? Is there a different way to approach it that, you know, we may be able to obtain this value that we think we're chasing? So I think, you know, when I, when I kind of think about it holistically, from that perspective, it's, you know, it comes down to, you know, it's metrics. Are you measuring the right thing and looking at it from the right perspective to actually know whether or not you're moving things in the right direction?

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Keith Hawkey 29:50

Yeah, that's I mean, if you were going Shane, if you're going to tell a. A younger IT leader who's maybe in his or her first management or director role, a trend that you believe is going to matter enormously in the next five years, that most IT leaders are currently underestimating. What what trend? What advice would you give that younger, IT leader?

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Shane Creech 30:27

What I would probably say is it's easy to get caught up in the hype, because it's, it's, it's the thing that in every one on one with, you know, your direct report, or, you know, if you get some boardroom exposure, it'll be the thing that they're talking about. You know what? What I tell people is, don't just, don't just listen to what's said, but dig into the context of what's being talked about or being asked about. You know, relentlessly pursue that and understand what it really is, and then, you know, dig in and find out then how to solve that particular problem or or do whatever that is. You know, we operate today in a high growth organization. So for us, you know, regardless of what it is, somebody may be asking me for on the top side, you know, at the end of the day, it's always, what am I doing that enables the organization to grow in a more scalable fashion? You know, when I started in the organization, we were much smaller than what we are today. We've been in our very high growth curve. So for us, it's been about, how do you not just fashion the organization to scale. But how do you fashion the organization to scale effectively? Yeah, so

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Keith Hawkey 31:49

that's that's very well said. We have a lot of younger listeners that are always looking to, you know, pick the brain of those that have traveled this path and have been successful. So I'm sure that sentiment will be well received. Shane, we're starting to come up on time here. Where can our listeners find you, if they have any questions, what is a good way to reach out? Is there a particular platform that the best way to reach out to Shane Creech,

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Shane Creech 32:23

best way to find Shane Creech, I have minimized my digital footprint being in this industry long enough for my own sanity. Everybody in my family will be thankful for that at this point, but I am happily and easily found on LinkedIn, so please look me up Shane Creech on LinkedIn, and you can connect with me there, and always happy to either share war stories or insights on issues that you may be having within your own organization. Perfect.

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Keith Hawkey 32:56

Yeah, we'll make sure to include Shane's LinkedIn profile link in the show notes, and with that, we will catch you on the next episode of the IT Matters podcast. Thank you, Shane, for taking the time to spend with us today.

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Shane Creech 33:11

Yeah, thanks for having me, Keith, it was fun.

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Aaron Bock 33:15

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