

IT Matters Podcast - Episode 41

📅 Thu, Jul 02, 2026 1:46PM 🕒 46:43

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

AI, cybersecurity, IT solutions, technology advisors, enterprise transformation, data governance, business strategy, IT leadership, team building, technology change, decision making, AI implementation, business value, IT strategy, technology integration.

SPEAKERS

Derek Jones, Aaron Bock

A Aaron Bock 00:00

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, cybersecurity, industry-focused IT solutions strategy, and more. Now let's get into today's discussion on what matters in IT.

A Aaron Bock 00:35

Welcome back to the IT Matters podcast. It's nice to be back. It's been a few months. I know Keith, my co-host, has been doing a lot of the episodes recently, so it feels good to be back. We're recording this on a Friday in April here in Charlotte. We have not had rain in about three weeks, so everything is just covered in pollen, so hopefully where you're at, you're getting a little bit more rain, and so it's not as dry out there, and luckily I'm recording this inside, or else I would be sneezing my ass off. So I hope that you guys have been doing well again. Thank you for always listening to the podcast, supporting us on whichever platform you listen. Make sure to subscribe and leave us a review. There's been a lot going on in the world, obviously, since the beginning of 2026 it has been busy here at Opkalla. We're working on a new product that we're going to be launching later this year for all of our customers and folks that we know. So, we're excited about that. AI and everything going on with AI right now is keeping us busy, and I know a lot of you busy, so we have a lot to talk about there. And it's just been generally busy with the uncertainty and what's going on the economy, so very happy to be taking a break today to record this episode with a friend and someone here in Charlotte. So, without further ado, I'm going to introduce Derek Jones, who's here with us today. Welcome, Derek.

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Derek Jones 01:55

Welcome. Thank you.

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Aaron Bock 01:57

Very nice to have you. So, Derek spent the last two decades with SYNCREON and DP World, and he's risen to the Vice President, Head of Technology for America's leading a 350 person IT organization. He's been in exec leadership roles, supporting teams across North and South America, Europe, Middle East, and Asia, and large Fortune 500 enterprise global customers with third-party logistics and port operations recently served as executive vice president of technology Flow Control, which is a private, private equity-backed distribution company. And then Derek started his career in operations, and that foundation still shapes how he leads today with an offensive lineman mindset, and he can share a little bit more about that. It's a team first grounded in fundamentals and focused on execution, while continually pushing teams to innovate and raise the bar. Derek and his family relocated to Charlotte a couple years ago from Ontario, Canada, and we are happy to have him. So, Derek, thanks for joining the It Matters podcast. I know I've been excited about this. We had the pre-call, and we talked a little bit about your background, but why don't you take the first couple minutes to just share your background, a little bit more about yourself with the listeners.

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Derek Jones 03:10

Thanks, Aaron, appreciate the invite, and excited to be here. Yes, we relocated into Charlotte a couple years ago, but long career so far focused really around how can it be a service partner to the business. I was very fortunate when I started my career. I came out of college and started as a materials analyst, really shaped how I understand and how I support my customer, because for the first several years of my role, I was the customer I was supporting, being supported by technology, I was having to deliver for our customers or end customers, and having to understand what it means when systems are inefficient, unavailable, or not adding value, and how does that translate back to the bottom line, so it's really been great for me. I've been very fortunate to have opportunities to continue my growth, and then how do I pay that forward and continue to develop people along the way, while still continuing to innovate and grow the business? Right, that's ultimately where the offensive lineman mindset comes in. We are one part of a big unit, and you need to continuously adapt. It is not always the sexy function within an operating business, but ultimately you got to try and make sure and deliver value, so that you can show where your company continues to grow. So very excited to be here and share some insights.

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Aaron Bock 04:42

So before we get into more of your background, so we've talked about the offensive lineman mentality twice, so maybe share where did you play offensive linemen and how long did you play.

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Derek Jones 04:55

Yeah, so I played football for 11 years from. From high school through, and I played four years in Windsor, Ontario, Canadian football with three downs, a wider field, a bigger ball. It's a little bit different, but played for what was at the time the AKO for Atman, is now Sinclair College, and I was a center and a guard. Again, I'm not the tallest. I was six feet tall and 285 at the time. You had to win every rep and make sure that you were not always going to have a perfect technique. You're not always going to have the perfect play drawn up, but it's about execution, blocking and tackling wins football games, and you got to be able to grind through in 23 years of working, I've missed a day and a half because there's no excuse, you have to get the job done, no matter what.

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Aaron Bock 05:52

An unsung hero on the football field and an unsung hero in companies, as you mentioned, it before we leave the football topic, what do you think of NIL? In a couple thoughts.

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Derek Jones 06:06

Yeah, it's a great opportunity for you to try and focus on the positive. There's been a lot of players that have been only given opportunities at a smaller school, and now that there's better opportunities for them to continue to shine brighter. Cam Skattebo, a couple years ago, was, you know, started off at a junior college or started off at a small school, and was able to progress his way. And again, that's that doesn't mean that he had to turn into a first round draft pick, but he has his brand stock went up because he had that exposure, and he became an NFL player, and we've seen a lot of that in the last couple years, where it's not just about the guy that was a freshman making, you know, however million dollars. How about the University of Michigan that just won the national championship with a bunch of transfers from, in many cases, from smaller schools or had less opportunity?

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Aaron Bock 07:01

Yeah, it's a good perspective, it's, it's definitely changing the way the sports and like the recruiting works, but I do think it provides a lot more opportunity for those who are playing, and then go back, so you know, you said that you came out, you were an operational role, and then you, you know, obviously have had a lot of success in it, what drew you to the IT industry, and being in it, if you will, from what you started in.

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Derek Jones 07:25

Yeah, so I went to school for IT. I went to Sinclair College, and that was always.. I took apart my family's computer when I was seven, and gradually back in the day that was always something interesting, you could build and create and come up with creative solutions, and let technology be an enabler. So that was always the goal. But when I graduated from school, I needed something, and sometimes that's that's the wherever you start doesn't have to be where you finish. So trying to get opportunity has been a theme throughout my career, is whether it's for myself, but more importantly, for my teams, like it starts with opportunity and a leader who believes in you, and somebody that's going to give you the chance to shine, and how do you untap all those potentials, so the intrigue and continuing to evolve even across my IT career, I didn't just stick in one area. I've led solutions teams for software, I've led infrastructure teams. It's always been around service delivery back to our internal customer or supporting external customers. So, gaining that perspective across the entire field of IT has been invaluable for me.

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Aaron Bock 08:44

You went to school for it, you know, not, not in the last 10 years or whatever, but you know, get you or you were intentional about coming into the IT industry. Do you think that it's easier or harder to get into it now? And kind of, what do you, what would you say to a recent graduate or a high school student thinking about it?

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Derek Jones 09:08

So, depending on the space, the challenge that I have had this conversation with some high school and recent college graduates is you can't expect to walk into the field necessarily and jump straight into this mature technology role. You have to either have a very technical skill set that translates well direct in, for example, the network engineering, or in a very technical space where you become a technical expert, but more often than not, especially if you want to grow within the business you're at, is understanding the business, and then how to apply technology after that. So, there's very much different tracks. I would say, if you're going to be a software developer and you want to stay in that space, you know, there's a very technical path to go that route. If you want to be a CIO. Or if you want to work in a space where you're impacting change and driving transformation, it's less important to have had a strictly technical background. In fact, that broader background where you have a lot of different experiences you can combine together actually ends up translating more value.

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Aaron Bock 10:19

Yeah, and I think that's true. I mean, I think it depends on what you want to do. If you want to be an IT leader, the business, the broad experience, managerial experience, but if you want to be a very detailed architect, enterprise architect, network architect, like that's a different path. So, agree with you. You talked about transformation, we talked about it in your opening, you just mentioned it in the last statement that you made. So, curious, like, you've been a part of large, you know, 350 person plus teams doing enterprise transformations, and so, you know, what's in it, I guess, a what's experience you've had that you can share that that kind of shapes how you think about it, leadership, and just leadership in general from those transformations?

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Derek Jones 11:03

The number one benefit, let's call our number one intention coming out of a transformation is being clear about what's the direction, is there is there enough stakeholders that buy into the message, what are you actually trying to deliver, and whether your organization's 50 people, three 350 people in the IT department. I've worked in organizations that had 3000 people or 120,000 people having a clear vision and intention on what is the outcome that we're expecting. What does good look like at the end of this? And then let's figure out together and get the stakeholders bought in on how to drive that buy-in. If you can get people bought into the intention and the end result, your creative should be coming out from that space and getting people to contribute to those opinions, pull in information from various sources, whether that's experience, new technologies, and innovations, and then lessons learned. Right, we've a lot of these experiences and transformations will fail because if we're not, if we're keeping blinders on and we just want to see what's in front of us, you're not going to learn the lessons of what went wrong. So, continuing to adapt and evolve, I think the biggest thing I've had to learn from this is it's not always about the right technical solution. Is the business ready for it? Is there enough people bought in? Is the investment time now, or can this be phased in where you're going to see the value?

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Aaron Bock 12:38

and you mentioned keeping up and evolving, so I want to come back to what you just said in a second, but just what I mentioned in my opener, everything's changing. I mean, every week you read the news, you read some article, and you see all these new platforms out, etc. and a lot of it's AI, but how is an IT leader? Do you keep up with the pace of change? And then maybe the second part to the question is, it's like, you know, being focused on the business and it, there's a balance, but what happens to an IT leader if they're not keeping up and evolving with the pace of change of technology? Like, what's your take on it?

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Derek Jones 13:21

Yeah, well, Well, if you're not keeping up with technology and evolving with your business, you're soon not going to be in it. The reality is that any business and the technology that's changed, even in the last six months, with capabilities that have come out of whether it's AI or just leveraging new opportunities to connect products, that's frankly the where, where I see the biggest value is if you want to try and drive true innovation, trying to drive true change, it's balancing what is the capability now, what, how long do I have to implement it? Can I continue to iterate and grow that with the new technologies ahead? And to answer the question of how do you stay up to date, it's very easy to get distracted every week. There's going to be something new. Trying to be balanced and anchored into what is the business trying to do? How can I help drive technologies and capabilities that support not only the business as it is today, but being a strategic leader, thinking three years, five years, and then beyond? How can these technologies, even at their nascent state, how can they continue to grow and support and add value to the business, and it's working with partners. Ultimately, it's part of a team. Everyone's going to have input, and if you can present ideas and capabilities and potentials, getting people bought into the idea, and then being comfortable with failing fast, there are opportunities out there that are not going to turn out. But if you commit yourself to irreversible decisions, you're going to fail, and you're not going to have the opportunity to learn from those lessons. So, it's making sure there's balancing. Can you get 80% of the way there? Can you leave standard 80 and then variation for 20? If you spend a lot of time focusing on the 5% that isn't aligned, you're likely going to lose the values. Just try to stay practical as well, without getting caught up around the technology,

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Aaron Bock 15:30

and you've talked a few times about knowing the business to be able to make better technology decisions. So I'm going to ask you kind of a situational question, because I'm sure this has happened, right, but there are leaders, and I've seen great leaders in the IT space who encourage their folks to go get involved, shadow business users, shadow like, and understand the business. But let's just say that tomorrow you're going into an enterprise where you have a four 300 400 person IT team, and you start to realize, like, hey, some of these folks don't really understand the business, and they don't - it's not that they don't want to - they just haven't had the opportunity or been encouraged to do that. What are ways that you would try to start getting those folks to understand the business to be able to make that better decisions? And what are some successful, like, suggestions you would give to others that have to do this.

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Derek Jones 16:24

Yes, that's that's a great question. And especially in this remote world now, where we've got technology leaders everywhere, it's really hard. There's still a value of a handshake, there's still a value of walking that mile in another person's shoes. So, what I've generally had to do when I've had to adapt to the new industries or into new businesses that companies acquired is go walk a mile, go meet people where they're at. You'd really love for them to buy into your idea right from the jump, but that's that's not realistic. You need to get that cultural buy-in on where you want to operate, how you want the technology to evolve, and meet people where they're at now. And how can you provide some iterative solutions to help not only gain trust but start to understand their perspective? What problems are you dealing with every day? You can't just throw money at every problem. How can we make the solution a little easier for you to do your job and deliver value back to your customer? How can I help, whether it's an operational person or the marketing team or the sales organization? A lot of times it's just listening and understanding what problem are we solving, and then hey, we've got some experienced people that can help deliver that value, is it quality of data, is it processes that are more efficient. How can we help again get let's get 80% value started, and the rest will continue to improve and iterate as you get more experience, and again, if you're going to only be solving one problem every day, that's that's still improvements, 1% better every day, at least.

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Aaron Bock 18:07

Even more specifically than that, you know. So, say I'm a, I'm a level two help desk, or I'm some lower level role in an IT organization, and you acknowledge and understand as a new leader, hey, these folks don't really understand the business in order to be successful. Do you like, have you set up programs, or have you seen any programs where it's, it's successful helping that level of a person get more integrated with the business? Is it, is it, you know, you said walking a mile in someone's shoes, is it shadowing, is it peer group meetings, or, you know, how do you, how do you encourage that understanding and knowledge of the business?

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Derek Jones 18:46

So it's a bit of both. When I've worked in the, in the logistics space, where we've had, you know, the customers on the ground at a warehouse or in an assembly plant, and they need to see what's happening with their eyes, ears, and understand. Let's go pick parts for a little bit. Let's go understand the perspective from the other side. What happens when they say something doesn't work? You're not always going to get a perfect answer in the way you're expecting it. So, learning how to decipher what did they mean by that. The screen did this, especially at a level two role, best case scenario for us was always finding somebody that was in level one. Let's progress them to level two, and then continue beyond. But having somebody that has that customer service focus that can read between the lines at times, and then validate. Right, we don't want to just assume that you have the answer to every question, check with the user, verify, and then if you need to be physically present somewhere, if you can't, a picture, a video says 1000 words, and be empathetic to the person on the other end of the line, they have an emergency, they can't do their job, even something is. Simple, as my keyboard doesn't work, seems trivial, but when somebody can't work, it's a major issue. So, something to the level of understanding how the service organization is structured. If you're going to have that hub and spoke model, everybody within the link chain together have to understand the dependency of each other, but still remain focused on who is who is my customer. What are they trying to do, and how can I help them?

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Aaron Bock 20:26

Yeah, you've had a lot of success over the years, and so you've built teams, you've come in and been a part of teams that were already built, and then you're changing them. Let's go, let's just say, compared to 10, five or 10 years ago, say you're coming in as the leader or a leader or top leader, etc. in it, and you're building a team in the enterprise, or you know, mid-market, etc. How do you build an IT team in a service organization today differently than you did five or 10 years ago? What's what's changed the most in from your perspective, where you, where would you coach others to say, like, this is how it's different than it used to be?

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Derek Jones 21:08

It's a great question. Some of the challenge right now is just because of the velocity of change, having people that have the capability of learning quickly. The old days of I went to school for this, and I'm going to target to do this career for the next 40 years. It's, it's rapidly evolving, because some of those roles may not exist. So, if you can find someone that has multiple skills, you know, we call, you know, multiple sport athletes, they can do a lot of different things in the technical technology space. You want people that have multiple skill sets, and then complementing them with technical expertise, right? So, you can't just have all technical experts, you can't just have all operational-minded people. There really needs to be that delicate balance, and then supplementing that with technology, whereas years ago it was finding someone that had an x number of years experience in a certain product. Can they integrate that product across your existing stack? You can't rewrite every to every product that comes out. You can't just rip and replace. So, how do you continue to be more multiple, evolving with what you have, and then evolving the next technology spend that you're going to bring in, let the data work together, let the integrations work together to really get the best value. So the people side of things is important, but the ability to learn first.

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Aaron Bock 22:34

Yeah, I this, we didn't talk about this in the pre-call, but something I've heard from a lot of IT leaders over the last couple years is with the with the rise of AI tools for resume building and you know certifications, etc. Red, when they have a position open, let's say a more technical position they need to fill, the resume pool is so much harder to go through and really figure out, does this person have the experience, or are they using tools that make them look like they have the experience, and so to your point, my opinion from that, and my, the only, the only thing that you can do, I think, is really try to assess the person in an interview and assess, do they have the chops to understand the business? Are they technical? Do they actually know how to do the things they're saying they're doing? And then do they kind of have it and want it, and will will work as a team. So that's from my perspective. What I see you changing gears a little bit, but you just talked about it. We were saying how things are moving fast, things are changing, everything's evolving in technology. We talked about this on the pre call a lot, you know. It leaders are being forced to make decisions every day. They have to make more decisions now than they did theoretically 10 years ago, because more things rely on it, and you can define that however you want. But how, as a leader, how has your decision making changed, knowing that things are changing faster, and so, like, traditional frameworks may go out the window. What are you doing differently when you're making decisions, whether it's on a tech, a person, an offering, a project, etc.

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Derek Jones 24:20

So I think that where we as leaders have to remain grounded is not to get too caught up in what the tech looks like, how do we make sure that there's value at what again, what good looks like starts that process, and what's the cost of that, but again every organization should have a clear understanding of what their strategy is, and then how does this decision impact that strategy? Is this something I've typically tried to start with? What's the organizational strategy? Do we have the people to execute it? Do we have. A process that we can support those people and that strategy, and where does the technology come in after that? Because the reality is there's always going to be another option. There's so many different capabilities out there, whether it's a product offering or just a methodology of doing something, and for the most part it's going to be similar, right, product to product, especially in the large enterprise space. There's a lot of capabilities that that they're all going to have, but which one fits your organizational strategy? Which one has the ability to be adaptable, so that if you do change something within your organizational stack, you're not having to rip and replace, so doing that extra bit of research, having the support from your team, so if the people that are in your team buy into whatever it is you're, and hopefully the suggestions coming from them, ultimately I want to be able to say yes or no at the end, because they've bought into the strategy and they understand business needs and they're bringing together a suggestion, and that's going to have some optionality too. It can't be ever just this is the only solution, we have to bypass everything and just go buy it. What's option A, B, and C?

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Aaron Bock 26:15

Yeah, well, on that specifically, like you said, fail fast earlier, and give you know, give your teams the ability to make decisions, and then you said optionality. There's there could be optionality. How do you, as a leader, empower your team to do that without creating chaos?

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Derek Jones 26:34

I think the best thing, the most important thing is, do we have a clear understanding of what was the objective right at the beginning of that process, we should, there should be a clear alignment, whether that's in a documented write-up or is its concepts again. What, what's the customer asking for? What's the deliverable look like? And then having the ability to consider what those options are, and which one is the best fit. The old analogy of, you know, you get, you get speed, quality, and price pick too. You don't always get to have that choice as easily as you would like, and it's always going to be a push pull with the business. So, while you may have the best technical decision, it doesn't fit for the timeline. So, can your teams and can your stakeholders, especially, do they understand where that push pull needs to take place? Is there a compromise available that's the best fit in the short term? And then can that optionality kick in later on, where you are going to grow it. You may have a critical business need right now, and you've got to make the imperfect decision, but it's the best decision for what the business needed that moment. It's a lot more difficult if that's a decision that can't be either unlocked or changed out later on. You're making a long-term decision right away, so you'd rather have something with some options and be able to at least evolve with the business, because it's never a linear path.

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Aaron Bock 28:00

So we talked about this, but you're kind of hitting it, decision making, you may have to just make decisions and know where your optionality is in the future. Right now, you know, I've mentioned it in my opening, and just with the pace of AI, there's a lot of things changing, and I think a lot of people feel pressure, and so from your perspective, like I see leaders being pressured into making decisions around AI because of a board meeting or conference or whatever, and so let's talk about AI, maybe a little bit from your perspective as an enterprise, like how real is the pressure right now for an IT leader to select AI, implement AI. Do you think that it's a real, like, hey, we got to do this now, or do you think it's being more of a manufactured sense of urgency that's happening?

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Derek Jones 28:51

It's certainly real, depending on the type of business. If you're in a product space where you're delivering software or you're selling something that's customer-facing, having AI capabilities is something that could very easily improve the product that the customer wants to buy. When you look at it from, let's say, the operational side of things, there are capabilities that were not there in the past, the legacy systems that required a lot of hand holding and touching and driving these things forward. The evolution of AI has allowed some really incredible things, but they only will get unlocked when the people know how to use it. That there is something distinctly yours that you can add value back in. Let me see if I can rephrase that differently. Where I think there's a desire across some of the noise around AI is that there's got to be an expectation of immediate return, and that's not always realistic. I think understanding how can you deliver value back to individuals. Tools, let's call it a productivity enhancement, something as simple as, you know, the co-pilots of the world, where you're improving meeting notes and you're improving summarizing data, that's great, but that's not the exclusive piece of AI. It also doesn't mean that you're replacing people and replacing their jobs. You, we need to augment capabilities and raise the floor, and there are some real capabilities that AI, whether it's in the generative space, but for in the industry, especially the power of the data. If you don't have a good data governance strategy, throwing AI at it right now is not going to be helping you very much. Now, AI can help cleanse some of the data, but you need to have a very structured way of making sure you have a clean source data. The genealogy, where'd that come from? What does it mean, and how does it match up as you start integrating other data sources? So, there are tremendous capabilities, but having that governance structure, having something that can scale properly, and you don't need a one size fits all solution. There's different horses for courses. I had a boss used to tell me that there's a way for us to try and apply a copilot and apply a clod. The technology team may have a different internal usage than your marketing department versus the HR team versus someone that's running a warehouse, they're all have usage cases, and making sure you don't try and one size fits all all of those different stakeholders.

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Aaron Bock 31:34

There's horses for courses. I love that. I have never heard that, but I am going to start using that. I agree with what you said. I think you have to look at each thing individually. I think the tough thing is that the, you know, and I shared this with you about some of the things we're doing. My pressure as a leader is, are we making the right decision because it's changing so fast, and so you commit to something that's going to change in three months, have you already made the wrong decision? So, curious, a couple questions on that for you, because you know an enterprise or a large organization can't change as fast as a small organization. So take an enterprise organization that's looking to implement AR AI, or figuring out how do we use it, how do you help the business understand whether they should even invest in an AI investment, or like, what's your methodology for helping a business leader understand what's possible? Where, hey, this is a waste of time.

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Derek Jones 32:33

Yeah, the reality is it's still going to start back at what problem are we solving? Right, you can throw money at the problem, and hope that you're going to get a sexy new overlay, and hopefully people are going to buy into it, but if they don't understand where's the value, and that can be something they don't realize yet, right? The you need to be able to show them the art of the possible, and that will start spurring some of that innovation on their side, but there are I think one of the challenges, especially across enterprise, is how do you, where do you get started, and if your first project that you want to drive with AI is this gigantic transformational change, you're probably going to struggle, unless you're bringing in a really good partner, and you have a really good business case, and you have some practical usage cases where you're going to start getting some gains quickly. You have to have both start identifying through working with stakeholders where are the pain points in your organization. What are some of the capabilities that AI has done so far? And then where do we see, as it leaders, we should be able to forecast a little bit where those benefits are trending, but knowing your business first and foremost, trying to apply a technology that doesn't fit is going to end up wasting resources, and more importantly, wasting time, and you can't get that back, you've got people every organization is struggling to do more with less, so if we can figure out how to augment the people we have and get more calories out of what's of that time and gain and drive innovation faster, that ends up again that continued evolution where we're going to gain more, that doesn't mean that we can't have large scale projects. I believe in driving the opportunity for scale, and you need to have interconnecting pieces. All of your platforms need to be able to talk with each other, and if you have multiple data sets, you're going to have fragmentation. AI is not necessarily going to help that. It needs to start from a clean base, and that may take some long-term investment for you to make that initial investment, and clean up your data, clean up your data sources, and consolidate, but if you don't have a clear end goal in mind, you may end up wasting a lot of time. Time, and money, and not be, not be around

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Aaron Bock 35:04

You touched on a very debated point right now about fragmentation. I want to double click on so some people, there's two sides. Some people feel we're going to move to consolidated platform, and you're going to have AI agents sit on top of it, and sort of everything will consolidate, and you'll have agents that are running off it. Some people feel no, you can leave your data in segmented, fragmented places, and then the AI agents can be the connector. Where do you, in an especially in enterprise, it like, do you feel that it's tech is trending towards more platform-based solutions that you can then kind of do the former on, or do you feel like it's trending towards best of breed single function systems and tools that you would then use AI across like a layer in between? How do you see it if you had to guess, or what you know?

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Derek Jones 35:58

Yeah, well, I think from a product perspective, a lot of the large organizations want to have integrated platforms, and that they can sell, you know, without specific names. You want to be able to have that vertical integration. If you're a product company, again, How can we get more piece of the more share of that wallet from a from a consumer side or from the business side of things, where we're buying that capability and learning and leveraging it for our business, the reality is you're always going to have tech debt as soon as you, whether you're in an acquisition side of things or you're trying to grow your business, organic growth is only going to go so far, if you've got to do some inorganic growth, you're going to have integral legacy platforms that some pieces may be non-negotiable. It security is an example. You need to protect your perimeter. You've got to make sure that you don't have that leakage. You've got to make sure that you're securing any entry points and protect, protect your core assets, but you're not necessarily going to be able to right away integrate ERPs and other systems. How can you leverage some of the AI capabilities and data capabilities where you're still pulling that data in, operating it through that cleanse, integrating it into the overall overlay of your organization, right? So, creating a platform that doesn't necessarily need perfect to operate again. Do you have a good intention around what your AI is producing? Do you have data that can help, good data that's going to feed into it, that's going to make it more valuable? So, I would guess I would expect that long term it's always going to be focused on again around that optionality. If you don't have a system that can adapt to where your business is going, and I expect AI is going to continue to drive that, both on the product side and on the business too. But you've got to be able to deliver value.

A

Aaron Bock 38:01

One other question on that, because you said you know how AI is going to affect business, etc. How do you see like product teams, network teams, individual teams within IT organizations? How do you see that changing over time? Like, do you do you think we're going to be talking to a team with an AI coworker? Like, how do you see the next five to 10 years play out?

D

Derek Jones 38:25

Yeah, I mean, that's that's what we're seeing right now, where again the life of the coder is going to evolve. The reality is that some of these AI platforms can write really sophisticated code in a short amount of time, and if it's going to write really good code, then you're not going to need as much QA. I would hope that you know if your organization is going to continue to scale upwards, you can automate some of the testing on the network side of things, threats identification, leveraging changes and deployments across your ecosystem, those are all things where you can add a layer of automation, but as well some of that intelligent automation to secure your business. Again, do more with less. I would expect the IT person of the future needs to know how to leverage AI as a capability tool set, but it's not I, in my view, you cannot also lose that personal touch, that understanding of the business, because at some point you've got to start somewhere if you only want to have 20 year experienced developers and then a bunch of, you know, AI agents that sit over top when that person retires, you're going to be stuck. So, you've got to still continue to have the correct balance of talent, people power, understanding the business, and, and then, as well, you're not going to. Able to have as many people as you want, is AI or automation going to help supplement? Does it using consultancy or contractor resources that can help you know focus on when you have a burst capacity or you have a specific knowledge that you don't have in your team? That's where using a partner like Opkalla, like others who can help fill the gap for you?

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Aaron Bock 40:22

Yeah, we got to wrap up here. So, two final questions, because I think this has been great, and I think you've shared a lot of perspective for anyone listening. Encourage you to connect with Derek, just because he's got the experience. But two final questions: What's a decision that UC IT leaders having to make, or they're going to be making in the next couple - we'll call it next year - that you think they may regret, or regret not making. What's a decision that you see that is going to be a tough one for a lot of folks?

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Derek Jones 40:57

Yeah, if you haven't already made the investment into the security side, you're already behind. It is clear that, as we're seeing the evolution across these agents, that there's going to be a shift very quickly on moving to more automated agent type processing, and how those hardware platforms interface with AI at the end of the day. If you're supporting a business, understanding what they're trying to do, making sure that you're staying ahead of the game with those core principles in place, good data, good processes, good people. If you try and make a decision on selecting a platform and doing an all-in-one, whoever your investment platform, or whoever your platform you choose is, you better hope it's one that can stay involved with the business too. I think trying to one size fit all everything ends up being a challenge, depending on the scale of the business. In a smaller business, it makes a lot of sense, because you may not have the capability or the people power to have best in breed solutions for everything, but realizing where's your business headed. What's your organizational strategy, and do you have partners along the way? Invest in those principles and understand where's the value going to be. Where's your organization heading? So core principles, security, data governance, get good teams that that learn that learn quickly and fail fast, making sure that you're not over investing into one platform, you know, even even storage solutions, a capex investments going to be a challenge, knowing where do you want to invest in something that has a lifespan, or if you've got a smaller business, can you leverage some of these shared services, or leveraging cloud wherever it can to help evolve your business, but modernizing your stack, because there are a lot of legacy platforms out there right now that are going to quickly start to show their age when there isn't anyone supporting them or there's no platforms that can integrate with them, so being able to really have an eye on where's the future heading and do your platforms support it and how to integrate with what's coming.

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Aaron Bock 43:37

Yeah, I agree with that. You kind of answered this already throughout the podcast, but my last question for you, Derek, because this has been great, is what's a piece of advice you would give someone younger in their career, or switching careers, or in IT, and trying to figure out if they want to be an IT leader. From your experience that you've had over the years, what's a piece of advice you'd leave for the listeners.

D

Derek Jones 44:03

I would, I mean, if there's an understanding of where you want to go, I mean, there's certainly some industries right now that seem like they're going to be more prosperous in the short term, but just going back to what we talked about in the beginning. Ultimately, any individual person has got to be able to outwork and set the bar high. If you don't understand how hard you have to work to be successful nowadays, focus on that. Be the best at your current job, where there's no one else that can question where you're at. If you're at the management layer, we had this. I had this conversation with someone the other day. You're not always going to get promoted as quickly as you think you should. How can you be a solutions-oriented person and figure out where can you add value? Volunteer to do that next thing. Think whether you're a young person in the technology space or an experienced leader, I still throw my hand up constantly, trying to offer, where can I help, what can I do, where can I learn more, where can I apply my knowledge, and where can I pick something up that otherwise wouldn't have, wouldn't have seen, so just that eagerness and that willingness to do more than other people, right. You've got to be able to work and grind your way to success sometimes. So, no matter what, it's not always about being an expert in the specific tech, but how can you apply it? So, invest in yourself, invest in your team, and be a team player, and you're gonna win half the battle there.

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Aaron Bock 45:45

Yeah, I think it's a great, great lead behind. And if you didn't learn anything from Derek on this, connect with him, because he's a wealth of knowledge. I learned horses for courses today, so love, love that quote. But Derek, thank you for joining the It Matters podcast, and for sharing with us, we always appreciate love learning from folks like you. So, thank you for being on. For those listeners at home, thank you for always listening. If you haven't subscribed, please subscribe on your favorite podcast platform. And thanks for listening to the It Matters podcast. We're out. Thank you for listening, and we appreciate you tuning into the IT Matters podcast. For support assessing your technology needs, book a call with one of our technology advisors at opkalla.com that's opkalla.com. If you found this episode helpful, please share the podcast with someone who would get value from it, and leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or on Spotify. Thank you for listening, and have a great day.