The Digital Aspirations in Business Podcast S1E5 (transcript)

The Digital Aspirations in Business Podcast S1E5 – Rethinking Business Resiliency

Hosted by Doug Stevens, Vice President of Managed Services, with Kevin Leahy, Director of Data Center Practice, & Chandler Basset, Engineering Director, Northeast at Aspire Technology Partners.

Doug Stevens: Hello, and welcome to Episode 5 of the Digital Aspirations Podcast Series. My name is Doug Stevens, and I'll be your host. Today's topic is **Rethinking Business Resiliency**. If we were having this discussion six months ago, I would need to explain what we meant by that and why it mattered, and how business agility was so much more than technology availability.

However, here we are. We're four months into a pandemic, and I dare say everyone has experienced or learned the importance of being able to conduct business in new ways to reach customers and students, the importance of your employees being able to work wherever they are, and the importance of being able to quickly adapt to create new services and new supply chains to sustain the business.

So, the way we think of business resilience is different now, and we'll delve into this topic with our two guests. Our first guest, back by popular demand, I'm happy to welcome back Kevin Leahy. Kevin, you may recall, he joined us earlier in the season for our Top IT Priorities for 2020 episode. Kevin, you must have done well. You're back.

Kevin Leahy: I am indeed looking forward to it.

DS: Excellent. Actually, we're happy to have Kevin. Kevin has many years of experience working directly with enterprise customers to help them solve IT challenges, both for a global systems integrator, as well as for one of the largest technology providers in the world. So, happy to have Kevin here. He leads our Data Center and Cloud practice today for Aspire. So, thank you, Kevin.

Also joining us today is Chandler Bassett. Chandler is the Director of Engineering for Aspire's Northeast Region. He sets the technology direction for how we execute in that region. Chandler was an SE manager for Cisco for many years. He has a ton of experience in data center architecture as a technology consultant across enterprise, Higher Ed, and federal government markets. So, happy to have Chandler here with us. Thanks for joining.

Chandler Bassett: Thanks, Doug. And I'll be the first one to line up for an autograph from Kevin.

DS: Yeah, I know. He is creating quite a following for himself. He's an IT rock star.

Business Resiliency for a Hybrid World

So, since March, things are evolving so rapidly from initially being everyone in quarantine and forced to work from home, and now, we're adjusting our workforce towards more of a hybrid approach and having folks both remote and on-site. So, my first question is a two-parter. You guys can jump in. First is, how does this affect business operations, and overall productivity and efficiency? And if you would, could you share some examples of business resilience that you're seeing from some of the Aspire clients?

KL: Well, sure. This is a great topic, just to sort of kick it off, because it helps us redefine what we mean by resilience. If you went back years ago, we've all been doing this for a while. And you think about the heroes are recovering in a resilience environment, and you would hear stories of people literally on bicycles in a blizzard going uphill both ways and recovering tapes from archives and things like that.

But when they were done, what did they have? They got back to where they were before. That's the critical message. The first thing people realize is that getting back to where you were before isn't good enough. Resilience has changed. Resilience means actually adjusting your business - not just recovering your IT to the way it was—but recovering your business and doing new things to in order to do that. So, that's where you get the examples of resiliency that are really going to bring it to life.

Now, the obvious examples were all experienced and things like telemedicine. Before, it was less than 10%, maybe even less than 5% of the visits to your physician. Now, telemedicine is dominant, an excess of 90% of visits, and it's probably going to stay that way. It's going to change how healthcare is delivered. And things were different. You need to think about online waiting rooms. Even if you do go to a hospital, you need to think about the bar code that's going to let you in a parking lot and how they're going to decide when to come out and get you. Now, the hospital was always up and running, the data center is up and running, but the resilience was about bringing the patients to the doctors in a safe way.

It's the same way at the hospitals or at the universities. We're seeing something completely different, which is this notion of remote learning. We're seeing it all the way from K-12 up through universities. And how does that change the student experience? Some schools—they're now working very hard on, how do I reopen the campus, and how do I do that safely? And it's everything from tracing where the

students are, looking at crowd structures, looking at distancing, contact tracing, but at the same time, changing the learning experience. And those are just some easy examples that I think we're all experiencing right now.

The manufacturing supply chain is different because that's really about composing your business from different sources. Some supply chains dried up. Sometimes, you had to look at different sources. Sometimes, you had to look at different shipping mechanisms. There is a whole host of actual operational process changes that needed to accompany it. So, it wasn't just a single user; but, to the point, Doug, it's about operational changes. That's where you start to really see some differences in how I bring those remote employees perhaps to remote delivery, to supply chain, to actually changing how goods are delivered and how services are consumed. So, I think we're seeing that redefinition as we go forward with it.

CB: Yeah, to that end, Kevin, I think we've been working with one specific organization here in New England. They've always been a very large proponent of what I would say a modern collaboration stack looks like. So, it's not just messaging, but it's deep integration to meetings, and to conferencing, as well as matching. What they're trying to do is drive a deeper and more intimate integration, not only for themselves but for their deepest and closest business partners where they've actually integrated that collab stack into an AR engagement by utilizing commercial off-the-shelves AR headsets like an Oculus Rift.

And it seemed kind of hokey at first, but what they've realized is it's really bridging that human gap that a lot of organizations are kind of waiting to get back into—like let's get back into the office, let's do it safely, let's make sure everybody can go home at night—but this individual organization has reported back to us that there's a lot of people and that talk has died down because of that. They're very much invested in the fact that this - I hate the phrase but it makes sense here - is the new normal. This is what we're going to do going forward, and it's really going to enable a far more agile workforce in the future.

DS: Wow. Yeah, those are tremendous. A lot of innovation there. I guess the follow-on question to that would be: of those examples that you guys gave us, how much of that comes from a resiliency plan or a business impact assessment and how much of this was already planned?

KL: Well, I think that's an interesting question because most businesses had a business impact analysis (BIA), and most businesses had a disaster recovery (DR) plan. But, again, there were two things that were notably different. Most BIAs have had a concept of 'which applications need to be recovered first?', 'what data needs to be recovered first in case of a ransomware attack or something like that?', but what they hadn't factored in is the shift in priority for the applications. So, they've done a great job

of saying if an outage occurs - again, getting back to the way it was - how long does it take me to get back to exactly what I was doing before in the same way I was doing it?

What clients saw was how their BIA priorities changed. So, specifically, if you're looking at telemedicine, as an example, the telemedicine was, I would say, an unimportant portion of their activity. And, now, it was the number one priority. VDI was the same thing. We saw an enormous shift. And a lot of people had done VDI - certainly, it's been around for decades - but we saw it move from a low priority because it was mostly relevant to some specific task workers but maybe not to the most business-critical application. It wasn't driving the supply chain, as an example, but now, it was. So, while they had great plans for recovery to back to normal, many did not have a plan to say, "How do I readjust because my BIA is different now, my priorities are different?" I think that's sort of the key thing.

Now, where they had updated, and they sort of kept track, they were able to, if you will, keep pace a little bit better, but I don't think anyone had a plan in place. What they may have had, though, and more importantly, was built-in flexibility into their model, which allowed them to adjust those priorities. And where they had policies in place and definitions of policies in place, they definitely had a huge advantage. Where there were no policies in place, it was sort of a more manual and mundane approach. Adjusting that usually takes years, and they struggled mightily.

DS: Yeah. I mean, I don't think anybody saw this coming. And that sudden shift to sustain and be resilient really called for agility, speed, and scaling. And this wasn't a limited pilot. Everybody was all in 100% hundred percent—all or nothing.

Business Resiliency Challenges & How IT Heroes Overcame Them

DS: Can you guys share some of the challenges that you saw and maybe some of how those heroes in IT on the client side overcame them?

CB: Yeah, I think that's a good question, Doug. I think the first thing that comes to mind is the scaling effort. A lot of people have built portions of their network predicated on the majority of the people being in a brick-and-mortar location. Maybe they had a remote workforce, which was 20% of the people. When everybody is 100% not in those locations any longer, scaling becomes a huge effort.

So, we saw a lot of manufacturers step up and offer term licensing for people for free to absorb some of that scaling effort, but you still had problems with some of those services, those applications, or even those pieces of the infrastructure being able to remotely manage them. You had compliance issues if

you were in retail or banking where you were unable to manage those devices or those enclaves of the network remotely, again, based upon, maybe, SOX or PCI compliance stuff.

Specifically, we saw this in healthcare, and we continue to see it in other verticals where people aren't necessarily loosening those requirements, but they're realizing that we can't have these hard, fast boundaries when everything has been disrupted. And I think that has really accelerated people's adoption, or maybe given more credence to the idea that taking portions, or whole parts of their business, and moving them into a cloud provider or a cloud scale architecture, so that they can make those applications available and accessible to whoever needs them—both internal and external business partners—because, again, to Kevin's point earlier, being resilient and elastic in some of your decision-making, when it comes to application, accessibility, or just infrastructure availability, it's no longer a nice-to-have. You're either doing it or you're not, and you've got to get that squared away.

KL: Yeah. I can just speak from our Managed Services standpoint and what some of our engineers had done when all this took place back in March to help our managed services clients. I mean, I think, initially, you talked about everybody working remote. Well, companies, they typically had enough VPN licensing, for instance, for 15% or 20% of their workforce to work sporadically at home. Well, overnight, that became 100%.

So, we jumped in, and we had people configuring remote connectivity and secure remote access. The phone systems—all of those phone systems—IP telephony, and the collaboration platforms had to be updated with new call forwarding. We were deploying softphones on end-devices for customers, updating call scripts and call trees, and enabling single number reach.

I remember our Customer Success team making a huge impact with our Higher Education client, specifically leveraging some of those licensing programs that you had mentioned earlier, specifically WebEx, setting up WebEx license and pilots literally overnight, so that these educational institutions could continue the mission. And the Customer Success team was literally training educators and administrators to be able to reach their student body to be able to continue that curriculum.

So, that was sort of the initial wave. And then, after that, we also saw a huge uptick around our Managed Detection and Response business, specifically around some of the COVID-related phishing attacks and security threats, and, again, leveraging some of those licensing programs. We were turning on DNS layer protection for customers to help them protect against users, both on-net and off-net, and protect them from being redirected to some of those malicious domains. We were setting up pilots for endpoint security and just helping these organizations sure up, from a security standpoint, the new temporary normal with folks being off the network and working remotely.

So, yeah. And then, I'm sure that will continue with some of the technologies, specifically around adoption of SD-WAN and further expansion of VDI and some of those other technologies that we're starting to hear a lot about that as well.

Technology as an Enabler of Digital Transformation: Learning Lessons from IT-mature Companies

Doug Stevens: But let me get into our next question here - looking back, some businesses really appeared to sort of breeze through these challenges, and I think that's because they were further down the path in terms of digitalization of their processes and applications. And it's probably based on lessons learned from the past. And I'm specifically talking about the Targets, and Walmarts, and Amazons of the world. What do you think the lessons are that businesses can learn from some of these companies?

KL: Well, I think that's a great question. I suspect, if we went back to those businesses, that they wouldn't say they breezed through it, but what was very clear, and one of our clients spoke at Cisco Live recently and said if they haven't made the investments they had in cloud over the last five years, they never would have come out on the end the way they did. So, I think the lessons in here are a couple of things. And we all know people talk about IT modernization, and it's been a regular cycle, but it was usually based on, perhaps, an improved performance but more often, usually, cost savings. There's a return on investment refreshing technology. You get the benefits of all that.

But what we saw emerge, and particularly on the software side, was that the more advanced they were in being able to leverage the flexibility that software allows to be able to spread the workloads across on-premise and in the cloud, the ability to use software to reconfigure the environment, the ability to actually have made the investment in some operational process changes in automation and define some policies in advance. Now, all of those were the things you would say, for the last 10 years, if you wanted to build a private cloud, you would do those things, and you're going to work on hybrid cloud. And you did that, I guess, usually for cause, but the benefit payback paid back many times over in business flexibility.

And we always have those words—flexibility, agility, and governance, and all those terms—but how do you do those things together? So, the ones who were furthest ahead in adoption of building out those software-driven infrastructures, the ones who've made the largest advancements in defining policies, and the ones who had set up usage of cloud didn't really matter how much; what mattered is they actually had a method to use it, because, obviously, the cloud can scale and can expand, but if you

hadn't done anything there, that's a whole different process and you aren't set up from all things like you mentioned, Doug, security, networking, et cetera, et cetera that needs to get you there.

So, I think the lesson learned there is that technology is an enabler of that digital transformation. If your well down that path, you were probably well prepared for the disruption. If you were hanging onto your old processes and your traditional architectures, you probably found yourself in a very difficult spot. Supply chains on new hardware was difficult to fill. Getting people to go into your data centers and do the work was not really something that anybody wanted, and your workers were remote. So, all those things led to the value of that software environment and the investments that have been made perhaps for different objective, but those investments paid over many times in terms of results.

DS: Yeah. These are all great points, Kevin.

Defining a Highly Resilient & Valuable Technology Fabric & How to Become Resilient

DS: I want to try to see if we can pull this all together. And I have a two-part question here that I think is super important for our listeners, and that is, if you were to design a roadmap that organizations could follow to be 100% resilient, what would that look like? Is there such a thing? This is turning into a three-part question. And is there a way that the organizations can break that up? What could they do today, and what could be done in phases?

CB: Well, Doug, let me first instantiate a feeling of fear when someone says, "Can something be 100% anything?" I think I get what you're saying with that, that's not super fair of that response, but no one can predict anything. So, what we can do is we can learn or we can, I guess, weaponize our knowledge to do what we've learned from our own internal businesses, like you spoke about, and some of the products that we offer our customers. We can learn what we've done for our customers and the challenges we faced there. And in doing so, I think we can, by and large, say that we can make infrastructure incredibly available and resilient.

A lot of people know how to do that. We've been connecting bits, bytes, cable, and connectivity options for a while. We've been passing packets and frames across those infrastructures and enabling those businesses for a very, very long time. So, I don't necessarily want to convey a feeling that there's a Rosetta Stone out there, and if you follow it, you're going to be squared away, but there's a better-than-average shot that the industry in and of itself knows how to get you there. But the most difficult, I guess, process to follow there, in regard to all of this, is how you define those characteristics for your businesses. What does resilient and flexible mean for you? And how quickly can you adjust those concepts with absorbing your own internal processes and whatnot?

One of my very favorite quotes comes from a weird '70s sci-fi book that essentially says the definition of literacy for the 21st century is not reading and writing and arithmetic. It's learning, unlearning, and relearning. And I think if we can follow those concepts through, and really absorb that, and make that a part of what we do as technologists, and as technology business leaders, then I think we can do those things where we can have people being incredibly receptive to those new ideals. We can ensure that their productivity, while we're meeting these challenges, are there. We can ensure that our customers and our clients can still absorb our services and interact with our applications and our businesses. And just making that, to my ears, is what that means. That is what a highly resilient and valuable technology fabric looks like.

KL: What I would add to that is a couple of things. One, of course, is being resilient is a different definition. It's about actually being flexible, and being able to pivot to understand your current priorities, and have a way of understanding which applications are driving your business every day and to be able to prepare to deal with those shifts and changes. And that's different than saying, "I have a static BIA that I update every two years, and I do a compliance check and put it back in the drawer." And so, first is understanding those applications. What are those services and applications and your users doing? How are they consuming? And how is that shifting? Because it's going to be shifting all of the time.

Second thing I would say is understand your development and delivery model. The notion of continuous delivery is critical here because one of the things we've learned and understood now is that every business became digital overnight. Some were prepared, some weren't. And that's going to need some changes. Even businesses that were, I will say, classic third-party software users, like healthcare. The consumerization of healthcare, and the applications that healthcare is deploying to mobile devices to all of these things, needs a continuous delivery model. So, you're starting to see that injection.

You need the tooling. So, again, instead of planning, you need to be responding. And I think that's a critical pivot. You're not planning for three years. You're responding to today, a minute ago, or a day ago. And you're pivoting constantly. And I think that's critical. And all of that is based on data. If you can't respond and see how people are using, how consumption shifts, what services they value—data is going to drive all of that. And, to me, the whole thing here is become data-driven, responsive, flexible and get rid of the idea of planning, but rather get rid of operational responsiveness and flexibility to the changes that your data is telling you're undergoing.

DS: Well, there's a lot here. And we could probably do two or three podcasts on some of these subjects that you, gentlemen, covered today around data and some of the other technologies. And, just closing here, the one thing I think we'll all agree on is that the way we work and the way we interact with each other is going to be different going forward. And what that means to businesses, and business models,

and go-to market is going to be different for various organizations. But I think the one thing that we can say is that IT, technology, and technology leaders are going to be more important to this transformation than ever. So, we're in the right business. It's an exciting time, despite what the world's going through right now. But, hopefully, we'll be on the on the better side of this here in the near future.

But thank you, gentlemen, for your perspectives. I really appreciate you being with us today. And I think our listeners got a lot out of it. And to that, if you like the discussion today and would like to hear more podcasts, you can go to our website, which is https://www.aspiretransforms.com/, and you can listen to our past episodes there. As always, thank you for listening. And we'll see you next time on Digital Aspirations. I'm your host, Doug Stevens. Bye for now.

Outro: Digital Aspirations is brought to you by Aspire Technology Partners, a premier technology solutions and services provider designing, implementing, delivering, and managing digital infrastructure and IoT solutions to enable transformational business outcomes, creating more agile and efficient IT environments that deliver differentiated customer experiences for your organization. To learn more about Aspire Technology Partners, visit aspiretransforms.com or email us at podcast@aspiretransforms.com

This transcript has been edited for clarity.

Aspire Technology Partners is a Cisco Gold Certified Partner engrained in solution pillars that set us apart as a true Cisco solutions provider. We are committed to the continuous improvement of expertise and skillsets around Cisco initiatives that enable us to help and guide customers in the adoption and management of technology architectures designed to transform their organization. We hold Cisco Master Specializations in Collaboration, Security, Cloud & Managed Services, and Networking and is one of only 25 partners in the US to receive the Cisco Advanced Customer Experience Specialization.