

IT Matters - Episode 25

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SPEAKERS

Anthony Kent, Narrator, Keith Hawkey, Jesse Erickson

N Narrator 00:07

Welcome to the IT Matters podcast, where we explore why IT matters and matters pertaining to IT.

K Keith Hawkey 00:17

Welcome to the IT Matters podcast. I am your co host, Keith Hawkey. Aaron Bock will not be with us today. But we have two special guests on the on the IT Matters podcast. I'd like to introduce to you Jesse Erickson, who is a technology advisor at Opkalla. And Anthony Kent, who is the VP of IT, of Four County Membership Co Op. Today, really what we wanted to get into was how is technology impacting the Electric Co Op industries, they operate off a different model than most publicly traded and private organizations? A lot of what they what Anthony has to deal with is is the operational technology aspect, how cybersecurity is impacting his environment and diving into the details of Electric Co Ops and what are the trends? What what do we see in the future and the cut when it comes to technology impacting the industry? Jesse Erickson, how did you meet Anthony.

J Jesse Erickson 01:20

So first, thanks for letting me jump on the show. This is actually my first time doing a podcast. And so I'm really excited about it. I have provided content a lot of times for some of my partners and other industries that do podcast, but I'm really looking forward to the opportunity to actually talk. So how I know Anthony. So last year, I went to Technology Conference in Myrtle Beach for EMCS. We went there for Opkalla, trying to showcase what Opkalla can deliver and how much value we can add for the EMC space, stayed in contact and then just recently said, hey, you know, my partner, Keith, he does this podcast based on what you talk about, and the things that you post in your content on your LinkedIn page, I think you'd be a great asset to this show. And so that's where we are right now we're going to talk through it, we're going to try to, you know, pull out most of that information from his mind in the short hour that we have with each other. And then hopefully we can use that to educate the technology folks out there.

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Keith Hawkey 02:26

So Anthony, they had to start off here, we'd love to get into somewhat of the background of how did you end up where you are? How did you decide to join the Electric Co Op, that you manage the IT environment of? Can you tell us a little bit about your background and in your career journey here?

A

Anthony Kent 02:46

I've always been a techie from a little kid, I remember when I was little, you know, taking apart old boom boxes and putting them back together and trying to put more speakers on and stuff like that. I've always had a technical inclination. And after high school, I was one of those people that I was not ready to go to college. So I joined the Marines and I really wanted to challenge and something home I grew up in anyways, one of the best decisions I ever made. Joining the Marines did that for five and a half years had a five year contract got involuntarily extended for six months due to appointment. All good things that happened. After I got out. I actually started at a software cooperative that served Electric Co Ops, and it was called Applied Technology Solutions. It's now owned by Meridian cooperative, or as part of merging cooperative. And anyways, while I was there, we had I think was about 40 or 50, electric cooperatives that we serve. And for some of them, we were actually the IT department for them though the rural small cooperatives. And so I was basically working day in and day out with coops and just got really acquainted with the industry and the folks in IT and hearing more about cooperatives. It's the best business model out there. I'll say that when go into that later, after that actually took the job as IT manager at a electric cooperative that we served. It was Buckeye Rec. And Southeast Ohio where I grew up. I did that for three years. Long story short, wanted to relocate back to North Carolina, where I was stationed for the most part in the Marines and worked for a while afterwards. So I went back to North Carolina and I supported the Department of the Navy as a cybersecurity analyst working for Hewlett Packard Enterprise. Well, first it was EDS electronic data systems, Ross Perot's old company, if people remember that might be showing my age with that. And then later it was a Hewlett Packard Enterprise. But that one that was really a good stint of my life and I got to learn a lot. So I don't know a lot of folks probably don't know it, but the Navy Marine Corps internet is the largest network in the world don't think as larger as the internet. So I got to see the largest network in the world segment Internet, and, you know, one of the most secure environments that you can be in, I got to see how it operated. Now, granted, you know, we can't take that scale to anywhere else because, you know, they those are multimillion dollar contracts. And obviously, you know, electric cooperatives, we don't have that type of money, but a lot of the principles, I've gotten the take from that, and apply it in my own way to the coop world. But anyways, I worked there for eight years, my wife, she works at Meridian cooperative. So even when when I wasn't working at a co op, I was hearing about coops all the time just mean her having talks and just knowing a lot of the same people. And an opening I wasn't looking for a job was very content before that, but I saw an opening on LinkedIn for the IT supervisor, and he was just like, you know, let me just see what it's about. Not sure, I'll want to do it, you know, but just let's see what it's about. And once I just started talking with caught people, like, it's just that old history just, and you know, all that work, I've done kind of kicked in, and it got my blood pumping. And I was instantly sold myself within 30 minutes of talking to those folks. And once I got the position and shortly after I got promoted to the Vice President of IT. But anyway, that's how I got started in the industry.

J

Jesse Erickson 05:59

That's pretty awesome. You know, when I first started talking to folks in the, you know, energy Co-Op space, I've been a member for a long time I live out in the country in North Carolina, I still didn't understand, you know, what a co-ops role is no, you know, my life or how it even functions. So I think for our listeners, you know, can you kind of give us a little bit more of an in depth background on what the energy Co-Op is kind of its mission, and maybe a little bit of the role that technology plays in its operations.

A

Anthony Kent 06:32

I'll be brief try to summarize it, because there's a lot there's a long history to electric cooperatives, especially in a nutshell. So I'll just break it down. There's three different types of electric utilities. There's the IOU, the investor owned utilities, such as like Duke or AP, obviously, they're owned by stockholders. And then there's municipalities, mainly what I see municipalities in the smaller towns or small cities, and then there's all the rural area, which no one wanted to serve. And what happened is basically, the folks got together and stood up electric cooperatives, partner with the federal government with money from the federal government to help finance but anyways, what we are is so like, for for county electric, we serve about 35,000, folks, and what they are, is they're not our customers or our members. So they're member owners. One thing is, as a member owner, what they get to do is our board of directors that help, you know, governance, they do the governance for the cooperatives, you know, they can hire and fire the CEO, the members actually vote the board. In fact, just last year, we had an election, and we had two people running, we had a new board member elected, the members here, if they have an issue, they can go straight to the top, they can go straight to the board of directors and communicate with them. The other thing as member owners is so like the margins that we earn, you know, those are put back and obviously, we got to have cash flow to run. But the excess funds that we get, eventually they are retired as capital credits and give them back to the members. Every coop kind of doesn't in their own way. And that's something the Board of Directors guides, you know, when and how that's retired. Back out to the membership. We're not worried about our stockholders, we're worried about the people we serve. And I think for them, that's the best possible outcome they could get with us.

J

Jesse Erickson 08:12

That's pretty awesome. Good rundown there, definitely seeing the value in it.

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Keith Hawkey 08:16

It sounds like you're very much a part of the community. There's democracy and who's running the co op, you're not only providing electricity and energy and power to 35,000 homes, but you're involved in investing and giving the funds that are in excess back to the community that you serve. I don't understand why this this is the model everywhere, Anthony.

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Anthony Kent 08:41

Yeah, it's, it's unique. And anyways, it's here to stay, though. I think there's cooperatives and all but two states, I could be wrong. But I believe that's the case. There's cooperatives all across. And a lot of folks, like Jesse mentioned, you know, they don't even they're not even aware that they're part of a cooperative. But anyways, that's something anyone should look at. And there's a lot of stuff that they do, and you'd be surprised what they're doing. If you dig into it.

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Keith Hawkey 09:05

I'm already intrigued. And something else I've been intrigued with is your job is to drive the strategy and manage the team that manages your infrastructure from an IT standpoint. What technologies over the past couple of years have impacted your role and the IT initiatives of the Electric Co Op the most that you've seen?

A

Anthony Kent 09:30

I would say the one that's hitting us the hardest right now as far as a new new technology. Well, I don't know how new it is, but it's new to us. And that's the low code toolsets. We do have one developer in house but I'll say this cooperatives, so we're at 35,000 meters, that's typically how electric cooperatives kind of measured their size is by meter count. The average across the country is probably about five or 6000 meters. So we're actually winners cooperatives much larger than us, but in a whole we're really small organizations. But anyway, so most folks don't have a developer or they don't have a fleet of developers, we're very fortunate to have one, the low code pull set. So in this case, most of it is Microsoft Power Apps and Salesforce, it's allowing folks that, you know, didn't get a cis degree, you know, one of our system administrators kind of picked up quite a bit on that and enable us to develop custom tools, you know, to help meet our needs. Any company has us whether you're an Electric Co Op or not, you're gonna have processes that are, you know, ancient or decades old, and, you know, really can be revamped and modernized. Our IT department, we kind of stand out is we're not just trying to keep the business running, but we're also trying to improve the business. So we're looking at these processes that are outdated, and a lot of it is brought to us, you know, hey, we're doing this on paper. Now, we'd love to be able to do this on an iPad or do it on a computer and, or not have this in our office, you know, getting delivered between our districts, um, there's lots of things that they're saying and identifying to us, and we're looking at the technologies that we have, and seeing how we can apply those to help streamline or make that process better. The other technology, I would say, is AI. I think that's the easy answer. I think AI now I feel like we're just getting into it, you know, it's the early stages of, we're using the AI tool for our right of way management. So right away is like the tree trimming. And for most cooperatives, you know, our biggest cost is going to be power, you know, as purchasing power. But typically, one of the next biggest costs is right away, you know, trimming the trees down the lines. And so we're using an AI tool called AI dash is helping us one validate our trim cycle, we go on a five year cycle for our distribution, and it's helping, you know, is that the best cycle we want to do and, and also, there's certain types of trees, and there's certain areas where maybe they got more moisture in the soil where they're next to a river or lake or something like that. And the trees grow faster. And you know, that five year cycle might not be fast enough. And with AI dash, it's identifying this vegetation, and basically

showing when we should cut it, you know, that's one tool. And then there's the tools that everyone is really familiar with, like Chat GPT, you know, of course, reason I do say this, AI kind of reminds me of the cloud, going back maybe 1012 years ago, there are a lot of folks where you were either for the cloud or completely against it, there was no middle ground. And today, you'll find everyone's using the cloud, you know, in some shape or form. I see a lot of folks that you know, don't want AI in their environment. I will say this, you need to have some buffers in place to help protect yourself, protect your data, and your organization. But I think AI I would look at it like the cloud. It's it's here to stay. And it's going to be a bigger part of the future going forward. You know, we utilize Chat GPT, we're piloting Microsoft's co pilot, because I think there's gonna be a lot of growth there. Right now, the one use case we're wanting to get out of it is just using it to basically capture all of our meeting. Instead of taking notes, let Microsoft copilot, take the notes and then summarize the meeting and give action items out of it. So we're getting ready to start piloting that. We've got it in place, we just haven't had the meeting the test. So anyways, we're really looking forward to see what that brings, especially with like data analytics, just even with Chat GPT like you can upload, you know, a dataset and like a CSV or spreadsheet. It's amazing the analytics that can pull from it, it's really going to modernize reporting, you know, it may not be able to do the visualization, such as other tools. But as far as just uploading the dataset and getting trends and getting stats, we uploaded a fictitious data set to Chat GPT and didn't even realize that we made mistakes on the data entry. And it identified, we basically did our flights and travel. And it was actually able to identify, you know, data entry errors, and that couldn't happen. It was like, this person can't be traveling, because you haven't traveled on on this record. You know, so anyways, it showed trends, it showed anomalies. And was there's a lot of power there. And I'm sure in the future is going to do a whole lot more for us.

J Jesse Erickson 13:48

Yeah, I actually see a lot of, you know, one of the conversations that I had when I was down in Myrtle Beach last year was how AI was enabling just usage monitoring by the members, right, and being able to forecast with almost complete accuracy. When those peaks and valleys were in power consumption. And ultimately, for a co op, correct me if I'm wrong, you know, having that type of accuracy in those peak usage moments, usually results in a return to the customer at some point.

A Anthony Kent 14:21

My understanding is, for most coops, the cost of power, the cost of electric us purchasing power is typically between 60 and 70% of our total costs. I mean, that's the bulk of it, you know, 60 to 70% of our cost of that about half of it is the man it's not just the kilowatt hours and for those that are in the industry, they understand demand versus kilowatt hours. I'm not gonna go into that, but yeah, the reducing the peaks, you know, that can save a lot of money. And it's really needed and co ops are already doing technologies. There's a thing called conservation of voltage reduction. And what it is, is when it depends on where you're at, but you know, typically in like a winter, like if you're up north, especially in the winter, during the morning is when you know everyone's taking a hot shower, turning their heat on. And that's when you're going to use the most electric of the day. And what they found with CVR is that they can reduce

the voltage just a little bit where it's still in the thresholds where things don't break, that you can reduce that and it'll actually reduce the power that's needed during that time. So but yeah, with AI, like, I'm sure it's going to take it to the next level.

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Keith Hawkey 15:27

Speaking of of AI, you mentioned earlier that you are testing copilot that's brand new for most consumers today, I think it went GA just a couple of months ago,

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Anthony Kent 15:37

That's one of those things where I've heard a lot of people, they just want to put their head in the sand and don't want it on their network. If you got that mentality. I mean, I could be wrong, but I feel like no people got their phones with them, you know, they're gonna get on Chat GPT on your phone, like they're gonna find a way to circumvent that if you're blocking it the way you know, I think there needs to be roles and policies in place. But I feel like the best approach is to see what it's about, see how you can apply it and see what you need to secure on it. And the only way to do that is to start looking at it and testing out that technology.

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Keith Hawkey 16:07

What are your thoughts on copilot so far? What have you tested, do you have any feedback, any success or failure stories.

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Anthony Kent 16:15

It's a new product. And I feel like they're still rolling quite a bit out. But a little disappointed so far, and just comparing it the Chat GPT as far as,

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Keith Hawkey 16:25

Shots fired.

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Anthony Kent 16:27

I think it'll grow out. And they're the thing is they're using chat GPT just the way they apply it, there are some things that seem really cool that I have not tested out. So the one thing that's awesome, and this is where you don't want to use chat GPT is you don't want to be uploading sensitive data or anything like that to it, you got to really watch what data you're putting into it. But with Microsoft co pilot, and this is the part I really need to test out. And this might be awesome as you can actually pick your files, and they can be the source of your data. And you know, that's your now don't get me wrong, Microsoft is my understanding that they're not sharing that out. That's your data. Anyways, need to dig into that further. We're not yet Are you

ready to test that part out, but uh, was that so that's a huge potential, just be able to, you know, take a spreadsheet or Word doc and you know, be able to use that as a source. When you're given that guidance or given it the command what you want to do.

K

Keith Hawkey 17:19

It's amazing to me the opportunity for productivity enhancements within the workplace. And you were mentioning uploading Excel files and asking Chat GPT questions to draw analysis and to, because before that, that might take a couple hours out of your day to work through and understand the parallels and the correlations in the data to be able to extract that within a matter of seconds. That's life changing. That's that changes what you have time to do. Because I know in IT a lot of the times you guys are here, you're in the trenches, you're you're fighting fires, and you don't have a lot of time to do that strategic work. That's so necessary for driving the organization into the future.

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Anthony Kent 18:04

I get poked at a little bit. A lot of times with like general emails that I'm sending out to all employees, sometimes I'll go back into my guys area, and they're like Chat GPT wrote that. I'm like, you know, just something simple. So like, we know, we had network maintenance from 6pm to 8pm. And I just said, Hey, Chat GPT, you know, make a, basically generate an email saying we're doing network. And really, you know, I had to tweak it. Of course, you know, you have to review everything, and go through it. But it created a, you know, a very succinct email, and it was straightened to the point, and actually guessed that what systems would be impacted. And I had tweaked that a little bit, but it was pretty unbelievable. It would've took me 20 minutes, 30 minutes to write that email. And it took me two minutes to generate it took me two minutes to review it. And some about

J

Jesse Erickson 18:52

Yeah, it allows you to spend the rest of those 16 minutes on something more specific for your job and just enhances productivity. Yeah, my previous job I was I was a military officer for 26 years. And I would have loved to have that capability at my hands just to manage the sheer amounts of email that kept me chained to a desk.

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Anthony Kent 19:11

These these phones, they're electronic leashes. If I could just get it to respond to my texts, that would be a huge step too.

J

Jesse Erickson 19:19

Yeah. So we talked a lot about AI. Right, we talked about some of the other current technologies you are currently using within, you know, the EMC space. One of my questions is How do you manage and integrate all of that technology? Because I'm sure it comes with its

own set of challenges, just the integration alone. And I'm trying to understand what problems you've encountered and how you kind of navigated that challenge.

A

Anthony Kent 19:45

So there's a lot of challenges for us. Like most coops are relatively small. I mean, most organizations out there are small, you know, we're not all Packard's or Cisco's and stuff like that. So we don't have, you know, a bunch of bodies that we can throw at every solution. But specific to AI, I'll say the good part of that is, you know, right now, we're not doing any technical restrictions or anything like that. And it's kind of its own toolset, we're really looking forward to getting it integrated into a lot of our systems now, like al dash, you know, that was a product we purchased. And it's a standalone product. But what we're looking to do is sorry, this is actually more future stuff I'd like to see done. And it's really just communicating with our vendors, though. So we actually had Cinterion cares, one of our vendor for our call center, and they do our IVR. And we're talking about the future and talking about AI. And we really shared a lot of the same thoughts on where this could go. And like, so for like call centers, if you work with a call center, you know, typically to record the calls. And then you know, also like, the supervisors can jump on a call and like, you know, kind of silently listen. And if they want to, they could, you know, do a team chat or do some kind of chat and kind of coach them on the side, what we're talking about with with CenturionCARES is, you know, wouldn't it be awesome, if AI could actually analyze all those call recordings and give us, you know, give us metrics from that, you know, because the text to speech that's available, you know, just getting that integrated to where, you know, it can say how many times the people talk about my power bill was too high, or how many people were interested in solar, you know, right, now, we have to manually note all that stuff. So and our supervisors don't have the time to listen to every call, that would be impossible, you know, they can only listen to a handful, you know, we so to have a tool that can look at all that data and give us all those metrics, that would be so awesome. So I think one of the biggest things is really just working with your vendors communicating with your vendors. And hopefully, you guys share the same dream. And this case, we 100% do, they're already looking into the, you know, those solutions. The other part I did miss on is like the coaching, like you could have AI listening to the call and say they bring up solar, well, he could bring up like a cheat sheet of like your solar programs and stuff like that, you know, bring up you know, they all have notes, but you know, it's going to take them a minute to go find them. And if you could have, you know, it listening in the background, and just pre populate their screen with whatever they're talking about. There's so much that's possible out there. But I think as far as that coops, we use a lot of unique software, for the most part. And with that, I think it's just important that we're reaching out to our vendors and communicating with them. Because we've got a lot of things we would like to tack on accomplish with tools such as AI, and you know, we just got to have started having that conversation making them aware with the like the low code tools like such as Salesforce and Microsoft Power Apps. That one, you know, we're hitting snags to getting them integrated into our systems. And I'll say this, we're blessed because our CEO and board knows how important IT is. And we have more IT staff than most coops our size, we've got two folks that know the databases pretty well and could get stuff integrated. So what we've done, and also working with a vendor, we've been able to get data out of other systems and pushed up into Salesforce, you know, we're scrubbing, we're not putting any PII or anything like that. But we're putting the data needed to basically build tools off of and do that. So we're doing like energy audits, people, we've got folks that go out and do energy audits at the home. And now they're able to basically capture that data notes in there instead of on a piece of paper, they can capture it Salesforce. And you know, if someone calls in said they had an issue, and you know, they could see if an energy audit has been done in the

past and what the results were, you know, talk to the member about that there's a million things to do. But for that one, we had to have the expertise to be able to get that data out. You know, sometimes the vendor can work with that. It's just really having the bodies and the capabilities out there. It's hard for coops because I know a lot of coops they've got a single individual. And I really don't know how they do they really need more support.

J Jesse Erickson 23:56

Obviously, you know, you have a plan for the future with the technologies that are out there you have a very healthy conversation with the vendors that you are already partnered with. And you're actually helping them innovate based on use case. So that's tremendous that you have that open line of communication.

K Keith Hawkey 24:14

I can already tell you today just based on the the IT leaders that that I work with professionally, you're ahead of the curve, for sure when it comes to finding applicability, with the artificial intelligence tools that are available today and having it land and make impact quickly but safely as well. You know, there are the precautions that you're taking. And obviously you're achieving results very quickly. I actually learned a few tips and tricks today just listening to you. So I appreciate you sharing and I'm sure it's valuable to the audience's listening today as well. Leading an IT team comes with successes and it comes with unexpected challenges. I'd love to hear about successes, but I actually I personally think that the failures or the mismatched expectations of of a certain project going left or haywire, I tend to find those more interesting. And you learn from failures. Do you have any stories that where you had these these grand ambitions about a project that you were working on that didn't quite pan out exactly the way you'd planned?

A Anthony Kent 25:26

Unfortunately, we have several of those stories.

K Keith Hawkey 25:29

Yeah, I wanted one this morning?

A Anthony Kent 25:34

I'll be generic because this is a trend that we learned. And I mean, just, we're all learning. I mean, I've learned a lot in the last five years for counting, I've learned a tremendous amount. One thing early on, that we had a lot of issues with, with rolling out a new technology, or is basically just rolling that out on how we think it should be. And even if that was the best way, if you don't have end user buy in that solution is not going to work. This isn't all me this is a lot of this is my folks, you know, one of the weaknesses we had, when I started, one of the things that was brought to my attention was the communication with IT department, you know, I was

told basically, it needs to be better. And anyways, and that, that goes in all areas, that's us communicating with each other, and us communicating, you know, with the other folks for counting EMC. But we had a few instances where we rolled out a product, we went from the beginning to the end, and we didn't talk to the people using the product until the end. And I can tell you now, after doing it a few times, you never want to do. I mean, I guess there's probably an instance where you would, but you really need to get those folks involved at the beginning of the story at the beginning of the project. One, it just helps them buy into it either way, just being part of that conversation. You know, they felt like they've been heard, and they kind of understand why things are the way they are. Almost every project that we do now, if it's something that we're rolling out to, you know, affects a group or a party, you know, not security, of course, but like rolling out a new product. So we did truck inspections, and this is now this is a success story. But it's because we've learned off of previous failures. But with truck inspections, we wanted to go from paper to digital, and also do stuff with that date instead of filing in the box and put it up in a storage room and never see it again, forever. One of my folks, Earl Moore, he's a system administrator, he got the folks at the very beginning and said, you know, how do you envision this? How do you see this? He would meet with those folks, like every two weeks every month, you know, sometimes there's a little bit of a lag, and, you know, other projects go on. But with having all the people involved in that conversation, this has been a very successful transition, I was told up front, that this is not going to work, it's too hard to go from a piece of paper to an iPad, because there's too many categories. And you know, all this, we actually made the process better, it's easier, like the folks, and since we got them involved, it's not only that, I mean, we built a good product, but you know, having them involved and listen to them, the guys, you know, they think it's a better solution, like outside of all the extra stuff we got out of it. For them, it's easier to do it on the iPad than it is to do it on a piece of paper. But we've had several instances where, you know, we built that product without, you know, speaking with folks. And the end, either we'd get very little feedback, basically what would happen was we get folks that wouldn't use a product. So you know, we'd spend 20-40 hours even more working on a project, there's no one using that. And I can tell you from a person that works in IT, there is nothing more disheartening to me or to the folks I work with, is building, you know, working your butt off, and getting a product out there. And for it not to be you, that really, really hurts hurts the soul. You know, a lot of that was our own doing a lot of that was my own doing. And we've learned to just basically incorporate the folks cannot stress the importance of that you have to be that.

J

Jesse Erickson 28:56

You put the human touch on technology. And really what you did is leadership one on one, right? So you create buy in with the end user. And so, I mean once that once you have that almost every plan you put in place will execute, you know. So that's a tremendous that you're able to have that foresight to be able to add to the leadership challenge to onboarding new technologies. Looking ahead, though, you know, without talking about AI, because I know that you guys are getting ready to roll it but looking ahead and and you can look at the OT space and the IoT space. You know, what technology trends or innovations are you kind of most excited for?

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Anthony Kent 29:37

OT is moving at a blistering speed, maybe for the large organizations that are already there. But for a lot of us smaller organizations, you know, at first it was just getting kind of like remote

connectivity, being able to remotely control something or turn something off, you know, back feed an area or disable a circuit so people can safely work on it. You know, that's decades old at this point, you know, people were looking, they're wanting to get analytics or wanting to know is this phase out of balance, you know, as you know, what's the boat is looked like now online. So really what you start to see with the OT environment, this is kind of getting to the grid, but you'd see a lot of stuff at the substation. And what we're doing now is we're actually going down the distribution line, we're, you know, we've got all the analytics out of what we want out the substation, and there's some, you know, we're still working on but we want to get more analytics, we want to go down, you know, where the members that are the consumers at and see what the, you know, the voltage is like, you know, what's the load, like, on their lines, we don't roll out something that doesn't have communications or connectivity. Now, you know, back in the day, they would just roll something out, or recloser a breaker, and they wouldn't have no connectivity to physically go there, you know, and make those changes. Now, you know, obviously, you can still do that you can physically go there. But we want to be able to do it from the office, because it reduces, you know, our response time. And, you know, one of the biggest things, you know, with coops, you know, we want affordable, safe, reliable energy. And you know, the reliability comes into that we want to, you know, if there is an issue, we want to get the power back on as soon as possible, there's a lot of talk of OT versus it. And a lot of people probably won't agree with this, but the way I look at it, you're either going to do this down the road, I don't, this is one of those things where it's kind of like the cloud and AI, like, there's, there's no going backwards, there's only going forwards, and the engineers are wanting more data analytics, you know, everyone's wanting more analytics out of these ot systems. So it's either, you're gonna have to build that connection into your IT network, or you're gonna have to put somewhat like an IT product over in your ot environment, everyone's got to figure that out on their own, the OT network that used to be just kind of like the, for us, that'd be like the SCADA devices, and maybe one server and a couple of workstations that could access it, that is, the old days, like things are moving forward, there's a lot more servers, a lot more systems in place.

J Jesse Erickson 31:49

One of the things that I'm always conscious of is just like critical infrastructure, you know, we live in a dynamic world, and there's there's state and non-state actors all over the place, we have our grid, you know, is the lifeblood to our way of life. And so seeing these technologies, decrease the likelihood of any, you know, significant issues with it is kind of what I'm keep paying attention to.

A Anthony Kent 32:13

Unfortunately, either if whether you're opening a hole to the IT network, or you're putting another system in your OT, you're adding risk to that environment, you can't eliminate it, you can mitigate it, but you're gonna add risk, you know, and you what you want to do is you just want to reduce that the best you can. I love the fundamentals. Like I know, there's a lot of tools out there and stuff. But you know, if you look at like the Purdue model, or the NIST guidance on the OT environment, like I would always recommend anyone starting there and in any application, use that guidance to put that system in place. Once you get the fundamentals, then look at the other tools that can help you out. And I'll say this, there are a lot of new tools

coming out for the OT environment. And matter of fact, we're most of the co-ops in North Carolina have been working together with our statewide organization NCMC. And we're applying for grant money to get some OT tools.

K

Keith Hawkey 33:06

The convergence of IT and OT are going to dramatically impact the security concerns going forward for every organization sounds like there, there isn't an easy way to implement efficiency, whether you're bringing OT into IT or IT into OT without very consciously considering the potential threat landscape as you do this. I've learned a lot Anthony, during this podcast, I can probably say the same for Jesse. In closing here. One thing that we like to do is if you could send a message out to an IT leader, you know, fresh on the job, what message would you send to them? What's an important tenant you live by, or something that you learned that is applicable to any IT leader that's looking to make an impact?

A

Anthony Kent 34:04

What I would say is sometimes, and everyone that's in IT listening knows that this job, and doesn't matter what your role is, it can be overwhelming. Honestly, I know cybersecurity has been out there but a lot of it's relatively new to a lot of folks in the industry. A lot of the changes that have in there, the changes are coming drastically. Try not to get overwhelmed and think about all the things that you're not doing that you shouldn't be doing or you feel you should be doing. Focus on improving. Like, you know, you're after you're being better than you were last year. You know, you can't tackle these things overnight. A lot of these projects can take, some of them can take years to get to. And I would just say you know, try not to get overwhelmed, break things down into smaller bites where you can handle and just focus on being better, whether that's with security, or technology, you know, being better than you were last year. Just keep moving along. We're all human. We all make mistakes. You know, all we can do is just try to be better than you know the next year. I do have something I would like push the folks outside IT that I think is important to the industry. And this is really to like the CEOs and the senior leaders leadership is, you know, as I've mentioned, a lot of these co-ops, they can have a single person, I've met a lot of these folks, I have been one of these, where I was the only person, you know, in IT at the organization. And as good as these people can be, like, there's no way they're doing all the fundamentals, there's no way that they're doing least privileged across all systems, there's no way that they're patching every system. You know, zero trust, you know, they could maybe take a stab at it. But there's, there's no way one individual, even without sourcing a lot of this can do. And I guess what I would like to say to senior leadership, you gotta have the IT staff to support your business. To me, it's a cost of doing business, you know, we rely on IT so heavily, you have to protect it and to protect it, you have to be doing a lot of these fundamentals.

K

Keith Hawkey 35:55

And I couldn't agree more. Anthony, what's a way that our listeners can find you if we have someone that wants to bounce some ideas off of your expertise, in your experience? How can our listeners reach out?

A**Anthony Kent 36:08**

Sure. I'm on LinkedIn, of course, and I have a podcast 'Off the Wire'. And actually, we're going to be in the transition of revamping that a little bit. We were focused on cybersecurity, but we're also going to start looking at technology stuff as well. But 'Off the Wire' or LinkedIn is a good way to find me.

K**Keith Hawkey 36:26**

Awesome. Well, we'll include those in the show notes. And really appreciate it Anthony, you joined the podcast and Jesse thanks so much for for being a special guest as well. We will catch you on the next episode. Thanks for joining everyone.

J**Jesse Erickson 36:42**

Thanks, Keith. Thanks, Anthony.

N**Narrator 36:44**

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