IT Matters - Episode 4

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SPEAKERS

Aaron Bock, Ron Horn, Narrator

N **Narrator** 00:07

Welcome to the IT Matters podcast, where we explore why IT matters, and matters pertaining to IT. Here's your host, Aaron Bock.

A **Aaron Bock** 00:17

Welcome back to the IT Matters podcast. Thanks for joining us today. We have a wonderful guest that I've known for a long time, Ron Horn. I'll let him introduce himself here in a little bit. Before we get started, I want to apologize for my voice today. If it cracks about three or four times that is because I'm dying from the pollen here in Charlotte, North Carolina today. So hopefully everyone else is not dealing with the same issue. Let's get started. Ron, thanks for joining the show.

R **Ron Horn** 00:48

I'm glad to be here Aaron. I have been looking forward to this. I'm also battling with all these allergies and things going on, but I've been excited about the opportunity to be able to speak with you on this podcast.

A **Aaron Bock** 01:01

It's hard to get you on the schedule, because you're in such high demand. We're lucky to have you today. I know you sent me a bio, but I don't like to read bios. I'd rather just ask, "Ron, what should the listeners know about you and where you're at today and your career history or personal history? What's about Ron Horn?"

R **Ron Horn** 01:29

Thanks, Aaron. I guess it depends on who you would ask, and what time of day you'd catch me. Typically, I'm probably known as a technologist. This is all I've ever done. I've been fortunate to have been in technology my entire career. I have been in a number of industries: healthcare, retail, manufacturing, federal government, even on the channel or consulting side. And I have most recently found myself in higher education.

A **Aaron Bock** 02:06

You've really hit the whole game then. Even the fast moving, innovational technology ones too: healthcare, retail education, sometimes we're a little bit behind on those.

R **Ron Horn** 02:21

I've been focused on finding my passion in my career. Timing is everything as you know, but I looked for industries that at the time are dynamic and being innovative, and are open to new ways of doing business and new ways of thinking about how to use technology. I've purposely tried to align myself with a lot of these businesses, although if you look at my resume might look like this guy doesn't know what he wants to do. It's one of those things where I've made it about me. It's about what I wanted to do in my career and what I wanted to focus on. Then I tried to, as I said earlier, align myself with those businesses who think along the same lines. Sometimes the time I spend somewhere might be shorter one place than another. That is because because of my career goals, and where I'm heading in my career.

A **Aaron Bock** 03:22

On this podcast, Ron, we talk about why IT matters, and what are the IT matters. You brought up that you have switched a lot in your career. I'm curious for those listening, how did you get into IT? How did you become a technologist?

R **Ron Horn** 03:39

That's a great question. I don't know if it was by accident, or by design. I was strong in science and math in high school. I liked to tinker with things. I was raised in an environment where my father was a handyman. He worked in the industry with textiles and manufacturing, but he always liked to tinker. I enjoyed the same things. That led me into electronics. Out of college at the University of Kentucky I went into the Air Force and went right into electronics. I got introduced to crypto early on in my career. A different kind of crypto than what people look at today. This is from the intelligence side of the house. I worked in electronics and electronic warfare. I absolutely loved that. I liked fixing things, I liked getting a piece of equipment that was broken and the challenge was to try to fix it and make it function like it was new out of the box. Even while I was in the Air Force, I got to do exactly what I love to do. I was too young to realize what it was that I wanted to do. My affinity for math and science led me in that direction. I have never done anything else.

A Aaron Bock 05:15

Aaron Bock 05:15

Thank you for your service, first off. That's an important duty to serve our country. So thank you for that. Second, I feel that it's not uncommon to find someone like you who has started in a military position of some sort. They are in one of the branches, working in communications, intel, etc. Then they end up in what we would call corporate or organizational IT. Why do you think that is? Is that a natural progression?

Ron Horn 05:48

I don't think so. I think it's timing, as is everything. It depends on when you're separating service and your time, and what industry demands that are out there. Today, it happens to be cybersecurity and intelligence, or intelligence gathering. People who are in those types of careers in the military seem to have a lot more opportunity. They have more oppurtinity in the skill sets that are available today that are made available to service people today than what they were 30 years ago, when I left. It used to be a lot of trades. A lot of people were leaving the service in the trades: in welding and carpentry, and construction, and electricity and HVAC. A lot of military people actually ended up in those careers: transportation, logistics, and those types of careers. But that's where the industry was at the time. Except for those who had specialty training. For those who were in the intelligence, career fields, or the electronics or electronic warfare career fields, there was opportunities for them with defense contractors. The Raytheons, the whomever. Northrop Grumman, whomever, there was lot of opportunity for those folks. Even when I left, those same companies were around and had opportunities for people with those backgrounds. I don't know that it was a natural progression. You mentioned a second ago that people may be gravitating back towards what they did while they were in the military. I think that's passion driving them. Life hands us all types of situations and circumstances for us to make decisions about our lives and our careers and where we're going to go and what we're going to do. Depending upon your own personal circumstances might determine that decision making process and where you might end up. It might be somewhere where you hadn't planned on going, or it might be a career field that you hadn't planned on entering into. I think if you have the opportunity to make a choice to choose where you want to go, I think you will gravitate towards that passion. And if it just happened to be something you were doing while you were in the military, that's where you might end up. Fortunately for me, technology has always been a place where I found opportunity throughout my entire career. I found oppurtinity at different levels and in different industries. However, it was basically the same thing through the evolving of technology. I was fortunate enough to be able to keep up with it throughout my career.

Aaron Bock 08:26

I think that's one of the coolest things about technology or IT. You can meet people of all different ages, from all different backgrounds, and who have all different skill sets. Like you said, its timing and its passion. Sometimes we don't find our passions until midway through life. It's not uncommon in IT to find someone who said, "Yeah, I was in accounting, and I became an IT person by accident." Or it was on purpose. Or it's someone who was on the engineering or operation side who went into IT because they see more opportunity and they find more passion in IT. I think it's really cool that there's not a single career path in IT. As an accounting major you always start at the bottom and you work your way up and you become a partner. It's a scripted path. It's similar with investment banking and other industries. But IT is not scripted.

R Ron Horn 09:27

It is not scripted. I remember the words of a very good friend of mine several years ago. He and I worked together when I left the military and went to work for the federal government for a number of years. I left the federal government and went to a small private computer firm which was a computer / imaging company at the time. I was on the computer side of the house while he was on the imaging side of the house as a developer. We became friends. Ultimately, the computer side of the house closed and I was pulled over into the imaging side of the house. We ended up working together selling imaging solutions. Subsequently, he left the company and started his own company, a lot like you. We stayed friends, playing ball and golf together. Life took us in different directions. I wanted to pick up and just go and move. And I moved all over the country while he stayed around the same area in Kentucky. He said to me a number of years ago, because there was a point in my life where I was questioning my career choices. He said, "Ron, you love what you do and you're good at what you do, and you're very passionate about it." And he told me, "Don't ever, ever lose that." I think I've even heard you say this before. He said to me over the phone that day, "If you can find the why you'll find the what." I thought that was so rudimentary, but it's true. It's so basic, fundamentally.

A Aaron Bock 11:08

Do you owe your friend something now?

R Ron Horn 11:12

I would never tell him he was genius for saying that.

A Aaron Bock 11:15

We will keep this quiet, we only put this out to five streams.

R Ron Horn 11:21

He was right. That changed things for me because I started really thinking about my career moves. I thought about those moves more so than what I did earlier in my career. When I would have conversations with companies and organizations prior to becoming an employee or a team member, I would ask the questions that were important to me. What are your goals for the company? What's the vision? What's the thought with the leadership team around innovation? Where are you going? What's your strategic plan look like? And I would have them share those things with me. If they couldn't, or they didn't know, it was a natural process of elimination for me. Whether they were good, bad or indifferent, they may have ended up doing really well. For me at the time, those were the things that I was basing my decisions on.

A Aaron Bock 12:14

I'm going to jump a little bit because you just brought up an interesting transition. On this

I'm going to jump a little bit because you just brought up an interesting transition. On this podcast we talk about information technology and why it matters. We talk about misconceptions and topics around that. You're currently a CIO of a community college here in North Carolina. You've been in IT decision making roles for a long time. I think that's not by accident because you ask the why. As I always ask guests on this show, what do you think IT or information technology means in an organization? The follow up is, do you think it's hard to communicate between the business and IT and to really understand the business use case? Do you think that's a unique skill set? It's a loaded question.

R **Ron Horn** 13:16

I don't mean to sound crass, but I'm just trying to be transparent. I don't care what the business thinks about IT when I step into an organization. My goal is to change that, because 90% of the time I have to make a change. In 90% of the roles that I've stepped into, IT was looked at as a cost center. It is mostly overhead. We have all these people doing a number of different jobs. We know that IT is a necessity for us to be able to function and to operate and to be competitive in our business today. How much of that is really necessary? That question is really easy for me to answer. I don't mean to give a short answer, but I am changing the way that they think. How do I do that? Something that I learned from another mentor was early on in my career before I got my first CIO role. A gentleman from when I was with a large academic medical center, had pulled me aside and asked me if I was interested in being in the CIO program. He was going to send me to a CIO bootcamp or subsequently I could get certification as a certified healthcare CIO. I said, "Absolutely, that's my goal anyway." He believed in me and took the time to mentor me. He said, "Don't forget to socialize the accomplishments of your team." He said that, "Far too many times in his career he had been in organizations where it was just expected. They didn't know how IT contributed to the success of the business." He affirmed in me, "Your job is to make sure that they understand that on a frequent basis." For the second part of your question, my answer is that I work really hard to socialize the accomplishments of my team. I want to do that for all of my teams. At Guilford Tech, where I'm at today, one of the first things that I did was probably eight or nine months after I'd been on board with the college, we put together an IT annual report. It was 18 pages of what we did as an IT group for the college at the time. It contained every major project that we completed, and any IT related projects that we had completed to support the infrastructure of the organization and the business operations. I did another one last year that was 20 pages. The next one will probably be 25 pages. Even through the pandemic I was recording things that we had done for the organization. A lot of what will be published in that annual review will be the accomplishments that the team had made prior to, during, and post COVID. Whatever that's defined as. And it will also not leave out what the team accomplished during our cyber attack. My focus has been socializing the accomplishments of the team and to create more leaders. I've said openly to my team, "I don't want to be the expert in the room, I should not be the expert in the room. That's why you're here." We're here to support one another, but you're the expert in cybersecurity, or infrastructure, or service delivery, or application support or networking, or unified communications, whatever it is. I'm here to support you as a leader, and I'm here to create more leaders. And so these are the things that I focused on in my career. Administratively, there are a lot of things that I have to do. I have to attend a lot of meetings, attend conferences, sit on panels. What elevates me in my position in the company is creating an awareness, whether it's around the technology, or around the people that work with me.

A Aaron Bock 17:44

Aaron Bock 17:44

I really like the annual report. Do you think that it has helped not only morale on your team, but the business of the college or the medical institution you were working at? Do you think this has helped the business understand IT too? And come to you and said, "Wow, I didn't actually know that was such a big project?"

R Ron Horn 18:07

Absolutely, 110% that happens. I can't take all the credit for it because it's an idea that was implanted in me years ago.

A Aaron Bock 18:17

I think it's a good idea for listeners in IT trying to figure out management to take and adopt.

R Ron Horn 18:28

I would not change the thing about that. The rest of the senior leadership team along with me at the college has come to expect that Ron is going to come to the table table talking about something that IT has done or is doing. I report that at least once a month, and I never miss a month. It might be as small as reporting our monthly fishing report and the number of clicks that we had, and how it compares to the industry standard. I might report where we are from that perspective. It might be just that in one month, but it's also talking about new programs, new projects, new implementations, and new people coming on board. Every opportunity that I get to socialize not only to the senior leadership team, but also to the President's Council which I am on, I will take that oppurtinity. At least one or two times a year I get to go before the board and create an awareness there. I report what it is that we're doing in order to formulate an opinion, that IT is distributing to the organization. I want them to see that now we are really seeing the fruits of their labor and how the organization is benefiting from that. To your question, I would recommend it to anyone 100%. Socialize all the accomplishments, even if it's very little information, create an awareness.

A Aaron Bock 20:03

It's hard for people to have a team right now with how tough it is to hire.

R Ron Horn 20:07

My gosh, yes.

A Aaron Bock 20:11

For anyone listening, I think this is a great tidbit to adopt from this interview. Ron, you have been in a lot of organizations across a lot of different industries. Which organizations have done IT well, or are doing IT well. Whether that's organizational IT, operational IT, or the whole thing

IT well, or are doing IT well. Whether that's organizational IT, operational IT, or the whole thing. What are they doing that makes them different than other organizations? I'm asking this not saying it's just IT, it could be the whole business.

R Ron Horn 20:45

You're right. In a broader sense it's another way to look at it. It's not just IT. As a business look, COVID has rocked our worlds. And now the is economy changing. It's all changing along with the competitive landscape. Organizations must be able to maintain being nimble and pivoting, which always makes me think of that Friends episode where they're carrying the couch up the stairs he keep saying pivot. You have to be able to adjust quickly, and you have to be in tune and in touch with what is going on. You can't sit in your shell and focus on what you think your objective might be. I think then you lose sight of what the customer needs and what the customer wants, because those aspects change too. Use the COVID or the economy as an example of where we are today. Look at how the customer's needs are changing. When COVID came along, it was remote capability, and increasing the unified communications efforts of every company. You're sending everybody home to work remotely. How did you adjust to that? How did you continue to do operations? And if you think fundamentally back to your disaster recovery plans as a company and in business continuity, what do you do? You drop the electronics, you drop the technology and you go back to paper. Smilarly, only more advanced now, in COVID you had to do the same thing. You're putting technology in the hands of those who can do work operationally for you as an organization, allowing you to continue your operations and to maintain your competitiveness at whatever level it is. At that point, people were adjusting so everybody didn't know at the time what the results were going to be. People didn't know what the landscape was going to look like once the doors were reopened again. Being able to adjust to those changing environments is what's going to make those companies lead the pack. It's not necessarily any industry. I think those who lead healthcare, higher education, manufacturing, logistics, supply chain, whatever it is, the ones that succeed are going to be the ones that are in touch with what is going on. I say have your eyes wide open, having an ear to the wall and listening. Get out and talk through phone calls, conference calls, or through sending emails. Always stay in contact with the people that are out there to try to find out what's going on in the business and what's changing. Take those extra steps to dig a little deeper. Pick up the phone and call the customer. If you're a reseller you should call some of the biggest customers that are out there. Ask what's going on in their industry and what they are seeing. In my case we serve students. I would ask them some of the following questions. What is going on in school? What are you seeing? What do you like? What don't you like? Do you like the remote learning environment that you're in today? If you do, what do you like about it? If you don't, what don't you like about it? Regardless of the industry, how can we deliver a product to you that you're going to be satisfied with not only today, but at least in the near future? Because times could change again. I think that's the key.

A Aaron Bock 24:51

We see a lot of different customer situations here at Opkalla. Every good organization that does IT well always has a continuous feedback loop to their internal customers, to their external customers, internally, and to their stakeholders. Sometimes people view IT, or projects in the lense of, 'We got to get this big project done, and then we're done.' However it's never done, it's always changing. Those that are always making incremental tweaks and changes and tests and fails and who keep working at it seem to be more reliant and resilient. We saw the upsides

to that during COVID, so I agree with you 100%. I want to ask you a question. You brought up students, they're your main stakeholders. I'm going to take that a little further now that you're at a community college. Community colleges are in the news, if you follow it. They're being targeted by cyber incidents. That's a huge trend that you don't even have to be in IT to know. What do you think is a trend in IT, especially in education, that people need to pay attention to? That will be the first part and then I'll follow up with another okay.

R   Ron Horn 26:21

That's a great and very common question. That is what we who are involved in cybersecurity go to sleep thinking about every night, and wake up thinking about it every morning. I was asked in a panel, "How much of your time do you spend on cybersecurity as a CIO?" I said that I spend well over 50% of my time in cybersecurity related tasks. because the job requires it. The most leading thing for me in conveying to our stakeholders and students, is to do whatever you can to protect your data. If that means implementing other levels of security, whether it's multi factor authentication, continue to do that and continue to evolve with that technology. The attack vectors are crazy right now. They're coming from everywhere and they're relentless. It's nonstop. As you said, you can look at the news feeds on a daily basis and somebody is getting compromised. For one reason or another patching is a big thing. It is important to make sure your patches are up to date. Not only your your regularly scheduled patching, but also your emergency patches, or the zero day patches that come out. Making sure you're up to date on those is organizational. Make sure your backups are updated, current and have been tested. Get your disaster recovery plan out, knock the dust off it. Update it however it needs to be updated, and flip the switch to make it happen and test it on a regular basis. Our students carry around mobile devices with them all the time. That's the way of communicating with them on a daily basis. They're leaning more towards trying to do everything from their mobile device. It's so crazy to even say this now, because I've definitely seen computers evolve over my career. But it used to be everybody carrying around a laptop. Now everyone is carrying around a cell phone, they're not carrying around laptops anymore. It was laptops to iPads or tablets, now to cell phones. A large number of our students want to be able to conduct business, which would mean filling out financial aid forms, doing registration, selecting their classes, attending class, receiving their grades, corresponding with their instructors, all online, but also on a cell phone. They key in our industry is being where they are. Wherever they are, we need to deliver that content to them at that destination. And I think that's key. We as an organization have to be able to deliver that content to students no matter where they are. Although we're a community college and we compete with other community colleges, four year colleges, and virtual colleges, the borders have been removed. Students can choose to go anywhere they want. To answer the last part of your question, what makes what makes you stand out? It's that ability to be able to understand the needs of the student no matter where they are, and meet those needs. That only comes through constant communication with them in how they're doing and how well they're succeeding. It also comes from how well you're paying attention to their needs, and how they're progressing or not, and if your delivered content is relevant and current. Students are coming in and asking what kind of job they are going to get when they graduate. Back when I was going to school, we didn't think about what we were going to do when we graduated. We were just thinking about getting through college. Maybe I should have hung around with a different crowd. It seems more evident now that students are focused on where they're going and what it is they're going to do and how that education that we deliver can make a difference in their lives. Students are asking what kind of job they are going to get and where they are going to go to work. They're thinking about those things a lot earlier now.

Aaron Bock 31:14

That relates back to what you said before about students going mobile alongside classes and teachers. Content and finance are going mobile. That's a lot of changes to the historical and traditional college approach. To your point, if you're not constantly making changes when we are all mobile, you're going be behind as an organization.

Ron Horn 31:55

It's important to not forget that there are students that don't learn as well in an online environment. They need classroom instruction. As a business, you have to make the decision as to whether or not you're going to continue to do that. Either you're going to deliver everything online, or not, or hybrid. Community colleges are public servants. I think that for community colleges and regular four year colleges, that's going to be the way that we're going to continue to do business for some time. However I think there's going to be a gradual shift where more and more students are going to want to complete their degree online. Students are getting introduced to technology as babies, and so that's all they ever grew up with. It has been content delivery for them since they were a baby in diapers. As they get older that is going to continue evolving. I think that method of content delivery is going to continue to grow.

Aaron Bock 33:13

I agree with you. I think it's going to become more creative, and that trend is going to continue. It'll be interesting to see how schools adapt around the country. I know that I only blocked you for a certain amount of time and I want to be respectful. I want to ask this final question that I ask to all of the guests that come on the IT Matters podcast. Imagine that you, Ron, are speaking in front of a million people. It's your State of the Union address and you are giving IT advice to those who are going into IT or those who are not in IT. What do you want to tell them about why IT matters?

Ron Horn 33:58

I'm would go back to what I said earlier. I would tell them to find your passion. The sooner you can find your passion, I think the happier and more fulfilled you'll be as a person. If opportunity presents itself and you have the opportunity to make the choice, then chase your passion. As an individual you are going to be able to deliver so much more once you do. I think that once a person finds their passion, it's going to open up a level of creativity in your mind that's going to be endless. It doesn't matter the age. It doesn't matter whether you're male or female. Once you do that, the ideas are going to keep flowing. Your creativity is going to come alive. That's what keeps me going on a daily basis. I'm not saying this because we're doing the podcast because you're a friend of mine, but it makes me think about you when I say this. Approach every day with vigor. I know some days it's tough. I know some days it's hard and we all don't have good days. And that's okay, that's life. At least I choose to accept it for that and what it is. But it is important to approach everyday with vigor and with a purpose. You don't have to have a laid out plan every single day of what it is you're going to do every day of your life. To me that's boring, to others they love it. I would say to approach every day with your eyes and ears

wide open. We have two ears and one mouth for a reason. I'll let everybody in the audience figure that one out. The last thing that I would say that relates to the last statement is to be curious. Always take advantage of those opportunities to learn. Take the time to read and to venture out into other areas and be curious. If you don't know the answers to something, do the research and educate yourself, even if it's on fundamental things. I do that myself sometimes. I look at fundamental classes on Azure, or AWS or blockchain. It's a good review, but it also allows me to stay grounded and understand why I do what I do. Then look at those new areas. Be curious about blockchain, autonomous vehicles, or 3D printing. There's a ton of industries that are out there waiting for experts to come along. Who knows, you may find your passion through being curious and doing some research. It might open some new doors for you and allow you to learn a new skill, and it might allow you to be more passionate about what it is that you do on a daily basis.

Aaron Bock 37:12

That is not only IT advice, but life advice from you, Mr. Ron Horn. We appreciate you joining the IT Matters podcast. I know that the guests will enjoy this episode. Thank you all out there for listening. Hope you guys have an awesome week and Ron, thanks for being on the show.

Ron Horn 37:31

Absolutely. Thank you. I've enjoyed it, Aaron.

Aaron Bock 37:35

We'll catch everyone soon.

Narrator 37:38

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