Phil Caxton of DeskDirector

RT: Phil, what does DeskDirector do and how do they help the IT businesses?

PC: It serves as a client experience platform – essentially, it's a client portal and a way for your clients to view and access tickets. It's been designed as a way to help you differentiate yourself in the marketplace by making it very easy to communicate with clients and deliver services that they value.

We also have a staff heads-up display which brings all the relevant information together for your team, to make working a ticket more effective. The two platforms work harmoniously to speed up the process and allows your staff to check if the client is at their desk or out of the office.

If the ticket requires a call to the client to work with them, it makes it easier for your team member to know if they're available at the time. However, our focus is squarely around the client experience, because we don't think there's enough focus by service providers on improving the customer experience.

RT: I'd agree with that. What types of Managed Service Providers (MSPs) and IT solution providers use DeskDirector?

PC: They range from one or two owners to up to 250 staff, so the whole gamut of MSPs. They're usually providing outsourced IT service to their clients and using DeskDirector as a way to differentiate that and make it easier for their clients to work with them.

RT: When you get feedback from the MSPs who've implemented DeskDirector, what impact has it had on their business and their relationships with their clients?

PC: The feedback has been exactly what we're hoping for. It's worth mentioning that we are an MSP as well, and DeskDirector was born out of a need we had which we took to market. Our clients say they'd been hoping for this kind of platform for a while.

They see it as an elegant way to communicate and work with their clients and deliver value. A lot of our clients also use the platform for new business by presenting it to prospective clients to show why they're different, and it's a big growth area.

It's a way to show clients that they get the tool as a by-product of choosing you as a provider, but they can use it to communicate better and offer learning and training. It's different from what we traditionally see happening.
RT: So DeskDirector gives MSPs a competitive advantage?

PC: It does. Part of our decision when we first planned DeskDirector for our own use was to analyse what we were doing and to realise that we didn't present the difference to other providers in the marketplace.

We weren't making it easy for our clients to decide which provider they would go with, and although our clients get more savvy as time goes on, but they still don't always understand what an IT service provider does for them.

MSPs often present a flat, fixed fee to manage an IT environment but the client doesn't always understand the value they get from it. We wanted to create something that they could see, touch, and feel and was quantifiable with the value that they would get.

RT: So what does it look like for an MSP to deploy the platform, what do you see and what do the end users see?

PC: The product is an application that they deploy, which brings some benefits. The MSP can brand it and it fits in with RMM (remote monitoring and management) products such as Continuum, LabTech and Kaseya.

It appears in the client's system tray on their machine fully branded, because it's important to make it a tool the MSP can present as their own. Then, whenever the client wants to access tickets, training material, quotes and anything else we deliver, they get a tray. It's easy to use, and it also integrates with an active directory, so this encourages users to adopt it.

It's simple to install and can be deployed en masse very quickly. The heads-up display for the MSPs is also an application, which we did on purpose to make the MSP aware of things like which machine the end user is sitting at, which a web page can't do.

RT: What's new in DeskDirector?

PC: We've built an integration with an online form provider called Wufoo, which enables MSPs to present clients with forms. A common challenge is that clients could easily log tickets, but it was tricky for MSPs to deal with new user or change requests – the information from the client wasn't enough to solve the problem

Now, the MSP can give their client a form, which is easy to populate, and collect all the information they need, effectively decreasing the need to go back to the client to get extra details or clarification.

The forms are also being used in the onboarding process: they are able to collect all the necessary information they need right at the beginning and Desk Director makes it easy to do. We're iterating in the area of our learning centre and making it easy to integrate with other products.

We've also developed an active roadmap for the next six to 12 months, and we're focusing on areas such as mobile and using the platform on a Mac. These are things our partners feed back to us that they'd like us to include.

RT: Which PSA (professional services automation) do you integrate with?

PC: We now integrate with Autotask, so we're very happy to be part of the community. We also integrate with ConnectWise, and we're looking to add other PSAs in the future.

Dima Kumets of OpenDNS

RT: Dima Kumets is the Senior Product Manager at OpenDNS. What does OpenDNS do and how do they help IT companies?

DK: OpenDNS is a cloud security provider, which means that we rely on big data threat intelligence, looking at the internet as a whole. For MSPs, we're able to provide an additional layer of protection to catch all of the zero-day threats, all the emerging threats and all the other things that you really can't get with signature-based protection such as antivirus and firewall. We're trying to predict the threats and block them before they become a problem.

RT: What does that look like in practice for an IT company? How do they utilise OpenDNS to help keep their clients safe?

DK: We focus on the user experience to make it seamless and easy. It can be as simple as pointing your DNS to us and giving us your IP, or deploying an agent. It's then simple to control, so our standard security policy is the one that's typically used.

We block drive-by downloads, advanced threats, botnets and so on. We then customise the service, for example making the block gauge well for your customers. We add your logo so the end user realises that it's their IT provider trying to protect them rather than a random site.

RT: What type of impact does your service have for MSPs who are looking to increase their recurring revenue? Is this a service that they sell to clients or is it for them to reduce the cost of their support?

DK: It varies, but from our top-performing partners they include the security aspect of the service to reduce their ongoing cost. Looking at the service boards and the hours logged by our partners we see 50 to 90% drop off the number of hours they spend remediating, whether it's formatting or trying to restore systems from backup, or simply hunting down that piece of malware that keeps popping up.

They can make money with our service by licensing. We include everything for our partners so they can add on granular web filtering – i.e. the CEO gets to go wherever they want and the rank and file are restricted.

What's more common is a co-branded reporting dashboard that they can expose to their end customers so they can monitor what employees are doing without actually doing filtering. You want to make sure your employees are productive by management as opposed to trying to solve everything through technology.

RT: What's new at OpenDNS?

DK: We're now integrating with Autotask, which is very exciting. As the Product Manager, I talk to our partners constantly and I'm looking for ways to make their experience with our product better.

The feedback I always get is that they want tickets within their PSA rather than looking in the system for alerts. If we've done our job and prevented an infection taking place, we'll log that and there's now an option in Autotask to show customers the value you're providing.

On the other hand, if we're containing something, for instance a crypto-locker which comes in via email, we contain it so it so it can't get the encryption key. The service provider still has to do something, so we create a ticket to alert them, and update it if the issue persists.

Eric Dosal of BrightGauge

RT: Eric, you're the CEO and co-founder for BrightGauge. Who are BrightGauge and how do you help IT businesses?

ED: BrightGauge is a business intelligence platform and we cater 100% to the managed service and IT service market. We help our customers visualise their data, bringing it in from different data sources that IT service providers use to help them make sense of their data and make better business decisions a lot faster.

RT: What does the tool look like in practice? How is it deployed, what does it integrate?

ED: We help customers by pulling all of their data into one location, customise it and then consume it. We're a hosted solution so the whole process is web-based and customers choose how they see their data, whether it's via a report or in a dashboard.

RT: Where is the data pulled from? RMM and PSA tools?

ED: Our focus is on RMM and PSA tools, but we'll be adding new financial package integrations, including a release where one database will pull all the data so you can see it whenever and however you want.

RT: A lot of the dashboards aren't static, are they? Users can click and drill down?

ED: Everybody is talking about dashboards and the vendors are all deploying them, and we see them as a way to build awareness. Ours are designed to help users bring in multiple data sources, regularly refreshed, and can be displayed on a TV or device of their choice – it's not just an in-app view.

RT: What sort of data do customers display on their dashboards?

ED: Most customers are looking at service-related metrics and how to improve efficiency. The largest cost to businesses is always around staff, so users want to make their people more efficient. They look at whether the teams are billable and what the percentage is, and how to improve that.

They also look at customer experience and satisfaction, and if they're responding fast enough to queries. Those are all priorities on the PSA side. For RMM, it's more about monitoring. Looking at when servers go down, patch management and other things that could cause issues for your customers and require more time spent on servicing.

RT: What does a typical BrightGauge client look like? I'm guessing only MSPs of a certain outlook will drill into figures and manage based on metrics.

ED: Typically, the MSPS we work with have from 10 employees, up to several hundred. We're trying to refine the smaller MSPs with staff in the single digits who are struggling to stay organised as they get more enquiries and need to look at their data more.

We've put together the packages for those companies to try to help them so they're not put off by the price and think we're only an option when they're bigger. Most of the customers are service related companies or owners.

Typically, MSP owners are technical people, so they like being able to customise their data, and they really like the service metrics. We recently released sales metrics too, and that's taking longer to adopt because sales teams aren't used to using techy tools.

RT: What does the implementation of BrightGauge look like? Obviously, it's powerful, but most people look at a dashboard but have no idea where to start.

ED: Implementation actually is quite easy, and that's one of our differentiators from some of the larger players. If you're connected to a hosted solution it's put into the API (application programming interface) credentials, and if you're on-premise we load an agent that reads the data that we need.

Everything communicates to our data centre, we crunch the numbers for you and publish them. We give you a jumpstart with 10 to 15 template reports and 50 to 70 gauges, which are those visuals to look at to get users started.

Customers can use our templates or copy and tweak the ones they want. We also have a team that's dedicated to implementation, and that gives them the opportunity to really help our customers.

RT: What's new in the BrightGauge world?

ED: We're releasing a lot of new Autotask gauges and visuals, with several around sales to help people look at their pipeline. I'd like to develop resources for these too. We're also about to release version 4.0, which will include being able to connect to any SQL agent or database, and do CSV or Excel uploads. It also introduces the ability to do advanced calculations and layering so users can see utilisation or revenue together with tickets.

RT: Can you tell us about your background and the motivation to start BrightGauge?

ED: My father started a technology company in 1980 so technology is in our blood and we love this industry. I started an MSP out of our family business in 2004 along with my brother Frankie, who is the cofounder of BrightGauge. We ran that up until 2012 and then sold it to Konica Minolta.

In 2010, we found that we couldn't do the reporting we wanted for our customers, so Frankie started to solve that problem for us. We had data in silos but we needed to report it to the customers. We produced PDFs and Excel files, and I wanted to make it look better, so the software was built for us internally to integrate two softwares.

When we showed it to our peer group, they really liked it and the reports we were able to produce, so we commercialised it and launched BrightGauge from there.