

CIA man is an agent of change

Jenny Eagle | Jun 4, 2009 11:57 AM

Robert Crane's mission is to help businesses make the best use of the technology they already have.

From working on Wall Street to co-founding Saturn Alliance, an IT systems integration business in Sydney, Robert Crane set up the Computer Information Agency in 1995 out of frustration.

He says the SI business provided software for a vertical market and, at the time, everything was based on Novell Netware, and Windows 95 had only just been released. Crane was also using products like Quattro Pro and Paradox to help customers achieve their needs.

Once he started to realise what Microsoft was offering with Windows 95, Office and NT Crane could see the writing was on the wall for Novell.

"I was frustrated because I believed the business wasn't moving fast enough in that direction so I decided that if I wanted to work with these technologies then I had to make a change," he says.

"It was difficult to move somewhere without solid Microsoft experience under your belt back then and I also decided that I wanted the opportunity to try and build a business for myself. With this in mind I decided to make the change and go out on my own."

CIA is a technology consultancy that helps businesses and individuals improve their productivity utilising the tools they already have (like email) as well as incorporate additional solutions (like Windows SharePoint which is free) to enhance the way they work. Its technologies include Windows Servers, which includes Small Business Server, and desktop applications such as Outlook, Word, Excel and Onenote.

Crane says that with emphasis placed on the business benefits of technology, CIA works with companies to improve and streamline their processes using the technology they already have.

The focus is on providing an improved result for the business, which in the long term leads to greater productivity and profitability.

After working with Windows SharePoint (WSS) as opposed to Microsoft Office SharePoint Server (MOSS) Crane discovered there was very little information about WSS around. As he got more into WSS he wrote down what he learnt and created a Windows SharePoint Operations Guide which is available to customers.

"SharePoint is part of SBS 2003 and SBS 2008 but can be installed onto any Windows Server," says Crane.

"Windows SharePoint can grow from just a single server installation to a multi-server farm servicing a very large business but the question is how to achieve that, what version of SQL Server can you use. "Personally I use the guide all the time for my own reference because it has so much information in it. For anyone else needing answers about Windows SharePoint it is going to save you lots of time and research," he adds.

Crane believes most customers have more than enough technology but most only use about 20 percent of the functionality.

"Too often technology providers are seen as only pushing more technology as a solution. In most cases business have to invest some of their time improving their employees and their business processes to take advantage of what technology has to offer," he says.

Talking about how he got his business off the ground, Crane says there is so much you don't appreciate when you start your own business.

At first you believe that you can do what your employer is doing, but better, so you take a chance and make the leap.

"You soon learn that things like cash flow and business development are just as important as fixing any problems."

Crane believes there is always that element of doubt when you start something on your own but you can minimise that with good planning and research.

"When I started out, I made sure I had about six months' worth of funds to cover the eventuality that I didn't get any work. Luckily I did, but you can't simply leave a job one day and expect to be earning the same amount of money the next," he says.

Crane loves working in technology because of the potential it has to improve peoples' lives even though, he says "we seem to be failing to achieve that".

"We are proud to say that we are technologically advanced and yet we work harder, have less time to enjoy ourselves and seem more stressed. Why?" he says.

He feels most people are afraid to challenge technology norms, they are afraid to examine what the technology is and how it can be used, because they might be considered stupid.

To him technology is simply a tool, it doesn't have a life of its own - yet most people seem to give it one.

"I'm all about effectiveness then efficiency. Solve the right problem first, then do it the best way possible. I like to solve problems, and thank goodness technology constantly invents problems to solve," he says.

"Moreover, the big appeal is that technology is a great leveller. Access to the internet these days means you can learn just about anything for next to nothing, all you need is the determination.

"It also means that nowadays no matter how small your business, you can still compete equally on the world stage with any multinational."

CIA's business has three main elements: training, implementation and consultation.

Training involves teaching businesses how to use the technology they have available to them to improve their technology (such as, email).

Crane also holds training courses at local community colleges to help businesses learn about technology without feeling they are being sold to. He teaches one-on-one, group seminars and tutorials.

Implementation involves creating a SharePoint portal or other business solution that is the central repository for all business information, including setup, installation and maintenance of the solution.

"You can't simply drop a solution into a business, you first need to understand what infrastructure they already have in place and what piece can be provided to bring it all together," he says.

"We work with existing infrastructure resellers to provide them with the knowledge they need to implement the basic hardware and software.

"Once this is in place we can develop these basic tools into something that solves problems for the client," he says.

When it comes to consulting, some people simply want to access expertise in areas such as SharePoint, productivity, online services and new technology.

"Because we are always looking at new products and how they can be applied, we can help a business really shortcut their research time," he says. "A good example is Twitter. Most resellers we know of simply pooh-poo it but, if implemented correctly, it can be a very effective business tool.

"Our experience can help a business better decide on a Twitter strategy for their business."

Crane says his company is radically different from other IT businesses in regard to its staff.

CIA operates as a virtual business, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, across the globe by outsourcing.

He finds people with the skills he needs, tells them what needs to be done and they manage the process.

"In this world these days you only make money being really big or really small," he says. "Using technology I can have a global reach, I can access experts from any field in any location - why do I need staff and offices?"

"The secret is building good relationships with people who you trust to do the job - and that will always be the challenge. But why do I want the hassle of everything that traditionally goes with running a business?"

Robert Crane has a degree in electrical engineering, is a master of business administration, and is a small business and SharePoint technology specialist.

He is studying for a degree in philosophy and previously worked in both small and large businesses, and spent time working on Wall Street in the US for a major merchant bank on Y2K issues.

Until 10 months ago he was a partner in a traditional infrastructure business but decided for personal reasons he needed a change. "That's when I began down the path on which I am travelling with my business now," he says.

CIA's market is anyone running a business, whether they want training on improved email productivity or the implementation of an onsite SharePoint solution.

"Our greatest advantage is the ability to fit between the cracks in what customers may have already received from traditional suppliers.

"We can bring their disparate systems together and show them the power of their existing tools like Microsoft Office. We can implement simply and cheap technology like SharePoint or those available online to solve business problems."

Customers include infrastructure resellers, distributors, registered clubs, not-for-profit organisations and more because technology is "in just about every business these days and we figure that many of our solutions will appeals to businesses so we don't necessarily focus on a single vertical".

Crane admits he is still in the growth phase of fielding for customers. He works hard at generating new business in this climate and says after much trial and error his focus is on building a network of contacts and trying to offer as much information as he can in his field.

"I have not had much success with traditional marketing methods and as such am tending to experiment with less traditional methods," he says.

He has a blog <http://supportweb.ciaops.net.au/blog> that focuses on business productivity and technical information on the technologies he specialises on.

Crane believes "we are witnessing a demographic change in technology right now". He says there are no longer people like him running businesses - the trend is toward the iPod generation who find their answers on the internet.

"After reading *The World is Flat* by Thomas Friedman I realised that to survive I needed to move up the food chain and improve my skills," Crane says.

"Sure I could still sell PC hardware but why should I compete in that market when there is a vast untapped pool of opportunity over here? Taking that leap is always hard but to stay relevant you need to move with the times because it is the iPod generation who are signing the cheques these days."

The main problem he has found is that traditional technology is becoming commoditised.

Customers think technology is an essential service. This means they come into the office, switch on the gear, use it and switch it off when they have finished.

Their expectation is a simple monthly bill based on their usage. They don't want to worry about patching, updates, security.

"There is still money to be made providing this but, like electricity, it's made only by large businesses able to achieve economies of scale.

"If you are a smaller operator doing general networking work you need to be across everything, Windows, security, virus updates, ISPs, ADSL, etc, and that's simply too much these days," says Crane.

Of all technology, his biggest challenge is Google because out there somewhere on Google is the answer for almost everything.

Crane says it is the first place many people consult - so why do they need to improve their technology skills when all they have to do is learn how to search better?

"As a business I need to provide something that a business can't find simply by Googling. I need to provide something that either generates them profit or reduces their expenses," says Crane.

"Finally, you need to realise you have so much information to wade through every day yet you may not appreciate that you have to ignore 80 percent of that to find the 20 percent that has value.

"The trick is developing a good filtering system to find that 20 percent as soon as possible."

Crane says he has learnt that you must either increase profit or decrease expenses.

"This is how any solution is judged by a customer and to be successful you have to look at it from their point of view," he says.

"Technology is fun to play with and a challenge to implement but at the end of the day customers pay for a solution and you always need to keep that in mind.

"The same applies to your own business - to be a success, you need to run it as a business and not as a hobby. I admit that took me many years to appreciate but it is one of the most important lessons."

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