



EP: 067 Gerry Imhoff, Senior Vice President and CIO at Maritz Holdings

Lisa Nichols: I'm excited to have Gerry Imhoff on the show today. Gerry is CIO and Senior VP of IT services at Maritz. I am so excited to have you on the show today, thank you so much for making the time.

Gerry Imhoff: Oh, thanks for having me, I'm really looking forward to it.

Nichols: It's gotta be fun. So, growing up for you, what was going up like?

Imhoff: Well, I'm a born and raised St. Louisan. And I think stereotypical middle-class grew up in South County, I've never lived anywhere other than St. Louis although I've traveled quite a bit. Went to Catholic schools, had some of the last nuns that were around and I went to St. John Vianney High School, and actually interestingly, enough, that's where I really fostered my love of technology or was first introduced to technology. Dating myself a bit, but I think it was my junior year, I took a class in basic programming. The storage, was on these giant floppies. I don't even know what size they were I wanna say eight inch or whatever, but the giant floppies. I didn't initially pursue that in college, I went to the University of Missouri St. Louis for both undergraduate and graduate school. But I didn't lose that bug when I went to college, I switched probably my second semester from accounting to IT and never looked back. It worked out very well.

Nichols: That's wonderful. Well good, I'm so glad to know that they had those offerings even then.

Imhoff: Even then? Are you referring to my age? This would have been 1978 actually when I took that class. So yeah.

Nichols: That's great, that's great. So you graduated from the University of Missouri St Louis with a degree in?



Imhoff: My undergraduate was in MIS. Management Information Systems and my graduate was in general business.

Nichols: Okay, and then did you go right into US Bank? I think US Bank was probably one of your first.

Imhoff: Out of undergraduate, I went to Mercantile bank, which was a pre-cursor to US bank through acquisition and actually they paid for my MBA frankly.

Nichols: Wow, that's wonderful. So did you start as a programmer?

Imhoff: I did, I started as a junior COBOL programmer.

Nichols: There's still companies using COBOL, today, we still get requests for COBOL Programming.

Imhoff: Actually I learned a lot. I still to this day tell people the most. You will learn it in IT career is when you make a mistake, and after you recover from it. 'cause one of the first things I was assigned to as myself and a junior analyst who was an art major in college and she was in the Management Development Program, and we got assigned to implement some tax law changes in the pension system, and frankly, didn't test well. And the former Chairman of Southwestern Bell, when he got his pension check that month it was like nine cents or some ridiculously low amount instead of in thousands of dollars. Not only did I learn a lot about it, then I also learned a lot about leadership in that experience because obviously the president of the bank knew about this in a long line of management could have come down on myself and this other individual and they basically said, Okay, we all make mistakes, figure it out and fix it. It was a great experience.

Nichols: That it's a great experience. And if you had got reprimanded you may be afraid to take that next risk or that is so important. You've gotta have a culture where people have the liberty to try things. And make it a safe place. So you were there for a while, and then I think you migrated



over to Citi.

Imhoff: First with an organization called City Corp acceptance, which financed automobile dealer floor plans and then, I moved after a year and a half or two years at City Corp acceptance, I moved to City Court mortgage and I spent another nine or so years there again, actually, I would say, in the 84 time frame I really stopped doing anything that was programming or mainframe-based and moved on to with the timely called a distributed technology server-based PCs, things like that, and that's what I did most of my career at city corp.

Nichols: So then what was the precipice for you moving to where you are today?

Imhoff: Well, I suppose in keeping with the theme of this discussion, it was a leadership-oriented decision in the situation was City Corp for my first 10 years, there was a very mid-western value-based company, and you can just feel that in the last year or so I was there New York took over and came in and basically said, This is how we're gonna run it and you're expected to work 12 hours a day and after the 12 hour shift, you need to go to the bar and drink a Brandy with us or what have you? And that I could tell really quickly that that wasn't gonna be compatible with my style, and I just pursued other opportunities.

Nichols: So you went to Maritz. People in St. Louis. Definitely know Maritz. But for anybody that's listening, that does not know what Maritz does. Can you talk a little bit, because it's still privately held?

Imhoff: And interestingly enough, along those lines when I started at Maritz that frankly was before the internet, so it was really tough to research companies, I suppose it would have been easier if it was a public company but it was a private company, so all I really knew about it, it was this large company that span two sides of a highway in Fenton Missouri with a lot of brick. Didn't know much about it. But what I can tell you now after having been there for 24 years, it's probably best served by example. We're a research company we do custom research we are a travel company meetings, events, and incentives, and a motivation company. And a couple of examples I will give you is, if listeners go to technology conferences, are really frankly any conferences, a lot of the logistics both from registration through the event itself and all the on-site on ground logistics there are many times Maritz people behind the scenes. They wear a badge in the name of their customer, our client, another one would be if you stay at a major hotel



chain, buy an automobile, whether it be domestic or not, and get a survey about the sales experience or a service experience. The vast majority of those come from us. And then from a motivation company perspective, things like sales, Presidents Clubs or employee reward programs or different things like that, those were some of the things that Maritz does. Essentially, it's anything around people or partners and motivating them and getting them to perform better.

Nichols: You have been at Maritz now 24 years and you've done a lot of different things, right? So what does that leadership journey look like for you, and how has your role changed over the years?

Imhoff: That's a great question, I would have answered it very differently five years ago, because if I would summarize that I would say up until about five years ago, I've managed IT and led an IT organization from day one at Maritz. I was brought in as a manager of a group, but for the first, let's say, 19 years, I thought it was really all about technology and frankly, if I just think about the hiring process of people in my organization until about five years ago, I just look for the absolute best technical talent. And frankly, they could even be a jerk, but if they were really good technically, that's what I valued. And therefore that's what the organization value didn't acknowledge employees. What I have come to understand in the last five years is while technology prowess is certainly important, one's approach and the judgment they use and the relationships they form and all those types of things, cultural-based things, I'd almost say, infinitely more important than the technology side. There's certainly a balance which is one of the adjustments we've made recently but just the culture and a person's approach and judgment and frankly, their behavior matters a ton.

Nichols: Let's talk about that journey a little bit. How did you come to figure out that it needed to be people first? Was there a pivot point somewhere?

Imhoff: Yeah, very much so it certainly wasn't a day, but it was a, it was over a couple of month period. A frankly I think another leadership lesson is you have to humble yourself to understand that you don't always have all the answers, in as matter of fact. I mean, I tell people all the time, "If I'm 51% right, I'm doing pretty good 'cause the trend is in the right direction. I would say that again about five years ago, we were faced with a massive 35% cost reduction mandate. And of course the moment you get that you're like, How the heck are we gonna do that, right? And we started down that journey, and that's another part of the story we can get into, But concurrent with that if I look at the real reason we were hit with that expense reduction mandate, a lot of it was because our internal customers, the Maritz business units, we're really getting frustrated with



posts, it's not complex, but it's really, really hard 'cause it's uncomfortable. It's a very simple concept, but doing it through repetition is the only way you're gonna get good at it.

Nichols: You just gave me the perfect segway 'cause you said that you've written one of your blog posts and I know that's one of the things that you have been doing, and you've got a series, and I remember reading did you call one of them? Hello, my name is irrelevant. So talk a little bit about that. You, obviously, have a love for writing?

Imhoff: I do, I have a lot of fun with that. I go back and I still relate that to St. John Vianney, High School. I had an English teacher, Mr. Burke in my sophomore year, who developed that love of writing in the English language in me. But anyway, the blog series actually found to be pretty cathartic. We were coming out of this three or four year period where we not only met our 35% cost reduction goal we exceeded it at 40%, and if I'd have thought that even possible, the beginning, I would have told you you were crazy again, it was... We had many stressful evenings and all that sort of kind of stuff. So again, it was a cathartic series. So one of them we titled... I had a wonderful assistant, an editor Christiana Lockman who helped me with that a lot. And frankly, if you thought those were long post, you should have seen it before she got at him, 'cause they were probably twice as long. I can go on and on, but the hello, my name is relevant was frankly something that I don't know that I was conscious of, but when I started at Maritz there were... And I certainly don't intend to be disrespectful whatsoever. But there were a whole lot of senior managers in the IT organization again. So this is a long time ago that you'd see plaques on their wall that would say Manager of the Year from 15 years prior. And it's kind of like What have you done for me lately? And I don't know, that was conscious it something I've looked at in retrospect, but I think many of them, frankly, again, you probably over his closing a bit, we're a little bit more insured on their golf game than they were about what was going on in the company. And in their department and things like that. I don't know that I was on a bullet train to irrelevancy, but I could see how that could happen if I don't keep yourself sharp, and fresh and really analyze what's going on in your organization. But I would say, back to the cost reduction mandate, and how our customers felt about us because we were, I say a stereotypical infrastructure organization. Your standards, yes, we offered options, but our options and laptops were heavy heavier and heaviest. Customers hated them and we knew it, but boy, they were easy to support. So we use them. When you have that type of approach to your customer, you are on a bullet train to irrelevancy. And again, that's kind of the genesis of the title of that particular blog post.

Nichols: I think you're so correct, and that customers interested is so important in understanding how your customer is perceiving how your customer wants to work, how your customer wants to do anything, it's really important.



current or one of your former team members?

Imhoff: It was actually in a couple the... something extra, I've seen in a couple of my direct reports, and surprise, surprise, it's gonna relate to culture. Another thing I'll quickly mention is the expectation for transparent and timely communication. We tell our team that is in any direction. So, if people see me or anyone else doing something that they think our approach was off, or they pick up a perception of a customer, they're obligated to talk to us about that, which is wonderful. The something extra that was really a completely unanticipated situation, for me is after we had been a year or two into this timely feedback and talking about their behavior, people started to realize, the things we were coaching them on was transferable to every aspect of their lives. So their spouse, their partner, their kids, their friends there, whomever. It's been really rewarding for me, I have had, I probably would need to take off my shoes and socks because I'd run out of fingers to count on the number of people who have approached me and basically said, Thank you for what you've brought to this organization. 'cause it's made a difference, not only in my professional life, but also I have a better marriage because I use these principles at home. That's just so rewarding.

Nichols: You need to write more about that.

Imhoff: Well, if you'd have told me again, five years ago when I was resisting all this stuff, how rewarding I would find it and that I would be sitting here today. We've talked almost nothing about technology and for a CIO of an organization, a billion and a half dollar organization, to sit here and have the opportunity thankfully, the opportunity to talk to you about this and to not talk about IT and to talk about culture and behavior and relationships, that is crazy.

Nichols: Certainly Maritz shifted, and you were a big piece of that. Shifting more towards not that technology is the trump card but it's really, about people first. And the culture, so what about... Is there a leadership misstep? And we've kinda already talked about that. I think it was maybe the others to steep in the old way.

Imhoff: I hinted at it before. You have to be ever vigilant. I think because we felt really good about the relationship that we had established with one of these business units and their IT leaders in the teams and when those shifted over, we forgot the basic principle about the customer relationship and the fostering the customer relationship. The new team that was



Imhoff: Absolutely. You can find me on LinkedIn.

Nichols: Very good, very good. Well, thank you so much for being here, it's just been my pleasure to have you.

Imhoff: You make it easy. Thank you so much.