

iQ & A



iQ recently caught up with Peter Martin – Insight's SVP of Global IT infrastructure – during one of his frequent but fleeting visits to the UK, where he lent us some unique perspectives on his unique perspective.

iQ: *Peter, you're Insight's SVP of Global IT infrastructure. I'm not sure what that is, but it sounds pretty important...*

Peter Martin: (Laughs) mmmm... not sure about that.

iQ: *Is it as wide ranging as it sounds?*

PM: Well I left Manchester at 4 o'clock this morning and I'm off to the States again soon; but then that's the nature of doing the worldwide thing.

Essentially I have ultimate responsibility for every production system in the business... making sure that it all works and does what it's supposed to do. Production Systems is basically the stuff that's plugged into the mains, as opposed to systems that are still in development.

iQ: *So in one sense, you're less concerned with Insight's everyday business of being a technology provider and more concerned about ensuring its plumbing works; that the company practices what it preaches?*

PM: That's right. Part of what makes my role so interesting is that I actually represent our customer. In fact, in a very real sense, I am an Insight customer, albeit within the context of our business. I've spent 30 years buying technology, so I see the whole thing from the buyer's, rather than a seller's point of view. I suppose that gives me kind of a unique perspective on the business and what we do.

iQ: *It ought to give you a different perspective on IT's shift towards a more service-based culture too. I know Insight believe in being the customer's advocate; to try to be as much advisor as supplier... but that can be easier said than done. What's your take on that?*

PM: It's one of the biggest of quandaries IT is facing right now. Yes, the future (for IT providers) lies in trying to be a trusted advisor to the marketplace. But it's not as simple as just suddenly saying: "Right I used to be X but now I'm a trusted advisor". There's a bit more to it than just deciding to reinvent yourself.

For instance, if you have a reputation as a very good supply chain-based provider and your customer has 4,500 users to keep happy, they're going to get pretty nervous if you suddenly start moving away from the model they've trusted all those years.

If I have a big project coming up where I need 1,000 PCs delivered, and my box shifter, who has always done an outstanding job, turns round and says "Ah, but Mr Martin, I'm now a trusted advisor", what does that mean? Where does that leave me? To whom do I turn?

"Trusted Advice" is all well and good, but I still need to be sure that what I need will be there when I need it.

iQ: *So do you see the traditional product-driven IT supplier and the "trusted advisor" as being mutually exclusive points of view?*

PM: No. But I do see people like me thinking: "I've got 13 weeks to get project X done. Do I take a punt on this bloke who says he's a trusted advisor and simply hope that it will work? Or do I go to this guy over here whose capabilities I understand, and who has always come through for us in the past? Am I going to take that kind of risk?"

iQ: *Define risk in this context?*

PM: OK. I've got, say, a document management project that has to go live in 13 weeks in 26 countries and that's either going to make tens of thousands of users happy or really hack them off. As a naturally conservative person it is my nature to, first and foremost, deliver what the business needs.

Will I take a risk with that? Probably not. Point me in the direction of someone in my position who has 30% more budget and twice the time he really needs to do a project and I'll show you a person who might be inclined to take a risk. But that person doesn't exist, or if they do exist I have yet to meet them.

The other problem is that, not to put too fine a point on it, the least credible person to tell me his company is this "trusted advisor" is generally my supplier's rep. That's because he might only be saying it so that he can secure his bonus or commission; not necessarily because it's true or because he believes it.

As a buyer I have a natural scepticism here. But as a supplier we have to fight against that. Saying you're a trusted advisor and actually being one, are two different things, but at Insight we want to mean it.



iQ: *What else do you think will help square that circle?*

PM: It helps to have strong relationships with both customer and vendor and to be honest about your capabilities.

Again it's part of my job (as the person who signs the cheque) to be sceptical. When I'm 'buying' a solution I absolutely insist that we wind all the way back to asking "what's the problem?" and work from there.

So if a supplier were to come to me and immediately start talking about a particular vendor's solution without getting to the bottom of the problem first... that would set the alarm bells ringing right away.

So you can be an advisor, but to be a trusted advisor is a quite different and much more subtle thing. The minute you start selling to me you're no longer trusted.

iQ: *What you're saying then, is that a provider has to work even harder to get a solution from one of their rostered vendors past you?...*

PM: Absolutely, absolutely. As the person signing the cheque, recommending the solution to my board of directors, and putting my reputation on the line (which has been hard won over 30 years but can be lost in about 30 seconds). I need to know that there is an independence in your thinking that I won't find in a manufacturer.

iQ: *So the term reseller is really a bit of an anachronism here; but it's not readily replaced with "trusted advisor" or the C-word – consultant, is it?...*

PM: That's true. There's no phrase to properly describe what's really needed or where we want to go, but perhaps "Independent advisor" is closest to the mark today.

People like me are crying out for independent advice, essentially because it's very hard to get. You either go to a big network who will only ever want to sell you their kit, to a reseller who'll only be interested in theirs, or you sell your soul to the devil and go to a consultancy.

iQ: *I guess it comes down to semantics again. What is Independent advice exactly?*

PM: You're right. It's not consultancy because a consultant will typically charge for his "independent advice". Instead it needs to be: "Peter, I've looked at these 3 solutions. Having heard what you're after I'd recommend X, and here are the 50 reasons why. But if you want to fight me over that, question me, and point me in another direction, I'm happy to go there. That's a difficult sell but is it independent advice? ↪"

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iQ: I know that another part of your remit involves Business Continuity and Disaster Recovery Planning. It must have been interesting to be at the sharp end of that when Insight's Sheffield Offices ended up under water during the summer 2007 floods?...

PM: It was. But you know... our response to things like the Sheffield incident are actually fairly ingrained in our basic modus operandi. We tend not to even think of an incident like that as a disaster. To a degree you expect those kinds of glitches. It's a natural part of doing business... so you, well, roll your sleeves up and get stuff re-routed. Also, technology has made disaster recovery so much easier. Things like remote access and roaming profiles mean you no longer have to sit at your desk, or even a desk, in order to work.

It's also important to realise that disaster recovery isn't all management philosophy; it's thinking about practical things too. Sheffield is the perfect example. Before the floods ever happened, we had to ask whether the facility could

carry on working if something went awry for any reason. Could we re-route phone calls if no-one could get into the office for instance? Yes, I could re-route calls at the drop of a hat.

However, if we couldn't get into the office for two weeks, that would be a different proposition completely. Gone are the days when your IT was purely about a great big datacentre in a bunker with no user community surrounding it. Now a big part of my IT facility sits smack in the middle of my office, so if I lose that, I also lose my office and all my people too. That impacts, or should impact, my DR planning.

It's no good be able to report to my board of directors that "all systems present and correct" 12 hours after the disaster if the building is floating around in water and all my people are still standing outside with nowhere else to work.

iQ: So it's almost a question of when "disasters" will strike rather than if?

PM: Exactly. I'd also add that the nature of "disasters" has changed. 10 years ago a disaster would have been defined as a huge power failure or massive technical failure. Now it's much more likely to be a security breach

or human error. This is where it's vital to think about preventive maintenance; preventing the disaster can be much more important than being able to recover from it. I can overcome the security breach. I can conjure all the nastiness from my system. I can close the stable door. But the real horse has already bolted. Once that breach has taken place, the damage to my reputation is already done and there's not a great deal I can do to repair it.

The danger is in ever believing that you're covered absolutely... there's always the potential for something unexpected to be waiting around the corner. Look at something as simple as Bird Flu. What would happen if there was an outbreak in your area and your business was quarantined? What would your response be?

The answer is that you wouldn't have one. It's a brand new problem; not something you would have even looked at until a year or two back.

As such, I spend a good deal of my time worrying about tomorrow's disaster.

What we're saying is that, whatever the eventuality, you need to keep operating. You have to. It used to be that your systems could suffer

a ten-hour interruption and very few people would know about it. But if your system goes down now, your web site – and maybe even the rest of your operations – will probably go with it, and that makes an absolute public announcement of the problem.

Business is much more immediate now. Customers want suppliers that have an ability to deliver not in days, but hours. But that makes the stakes much higher...

That's what my job's all about. Making sure we can keep doing business.

iQ: ... which brings us full circle to you being an Insight customer as well as an Insight executive.

PM: Quite. And Disaster Recovery is the perfect example of that. Our house has to be in order or, with my customer hat on, I'm saying "Mr Supplier, you're recommending I do something that you don't do yourself". You're suddenly back to that semantic disconnect between supplier and advisor.

We'll get there by building up slowly. We're already there for many of our customers. It's really the only way to become a truly trusted advisor. ■

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