

Q&A with Don Thomson, CTO, Caron Business Solutions

Don Thomson, Caron Business Solutions' chief technology officer, is well known in the small to mid-market business software community as a software pioneer and co-founder of Basic Software Group, the creator of Accpac business management software. Don also served as Senior Vice-President in charge of Research and Development for Accpac International from 1996 through 2001.

His other career accomplishments include sole or shared development of the popular MS-DOS-based word processor, EasyWriter II, a best-selling Personal Information Manager (Power Up's Pocket Address Book), the first PC-based stock-trading program (Charles Schwab's eSchwab), and work on voice over IP (VoIP) networks.

Prior to joining Caron Business Solutions, Don served as Chief Technology Officer of a California company that delivers business process solutions to enterprise customers, so he brings a wide perspective to mid-market software and the benefits that it can bring to companies with enterprise-level business management software needs.

How do you define your role as Chief Technology Officer?

My primary responsibility is to provide advice and technology solutions to make our clients' lives simpler. Our clients are bombarded with new technology all the time. Technology's function should be to support business objectives, not ambush them. Caron provides technology advice, guidance and services to clients who want the benefits of new technology without the need to staff up their own IT team. I'm looking forward to providing practical IT services, including a CTO perspective when appropriate.

What are the immediate benefits that you provide Caron's clients?

Enterprise level solutions are overkill for most mid-sized businesses. I've been working with clients to plan out practical solutions, and often this involves explaining to clients what enterprise-level solutions do and at what stage in the evolution of their business these might make sense.

Let's use an example. I'm already advising a client who is transitioning their web-site from an "electronic brochure" into an "information portal," using their back-office data. Once a business exposes back-office information and processes, authentication and security become issues. Without a full IT department, how does a mid-sized company make sense of all the issues and select appropriate solutions?

Can spending money on technology help a business survive the economic crunch?

Certainly, the right technology at the right time can be cost effective and provide a business advantage. However, technology should always be viewed as an investment that pays back. That's true in good times and bad. Unbridled spending was a root cause of the economic crunch and not a way out.

What enterprise-level features are requested most frequently by your clients?

Integration. A mid-sized company has similar integration needs to an enterprise, such as integrating ERP systems with sales processes and CRM systems. Smooth integration can answer the question, "Does this bit of technology make your life simpler?"

What's the greatest strategic priority for business IT departments?

Business IT departments can provide strategic business advantages, but, first, their own house must be in order. Most strategic advantages involve a sales process and some kind of CRM capability.

Where/what is the biggest opportunity presented by today's business technology?

That's a pretty far-reaching question. Let me say "to reduce the stress in people's business lives." I could also say that the answer lies somewhere "in the cloud."

To be simplistic, cloud computing means that data is stored on a server and much of the computing is also done in a server farm. To use a "cloud service," all you need to own is a PC or other device that runs a browser – notice the growth in tiny laptop segment, let alone the iPhone / iPod segment. The advantage is that you only need to keep one or two programs running on your client device – not dozens or hundreds. What scares some people is that their data is stored in the cloud – yet I personally know about multibillion dollar enterprises that are keeping sensitive data in the cloud. In reality, data in the cloud can be more secure and less sensitive to theft or disaster than data kept on office servers or laptops, especially for small and medium sized businesses. Do you really think your office server is more secure than a server on Google's farm?

Is Software as a Service (SaaS) a good idea for your clients?

SaaS is for people who don't really want to know how a computer works. I see a great future for this once Internet bandwidth and latency have been improved another order of magnitude. It's still early days for SaaS.

Are all of your new network installations wireless?

Just the mice and keyboards. Wired networks still have far less issues.

Are there good Voice over IP (VoIP) systems for medium-sized businesses?

There are good systems available, but no real "drivers." VoIP adoption in larger businesses is not driven by cheap calls – it is driven because infrastructure is simplified – the IT and phone teams become one combined group. Medium-sized businesses without internal support teams probably have no significant driver towards VoIP.

What are you reading these days?

I'm just finishing the complete Sherlock Holmes collection by Arthur Conan Doyle. I suppose the appeal has to do with a character that thinks before he acts. I also read science fiction – Michael Crichton and Robert Sawyer are favourites.

You've been doing Tai Chi for over 30 years. What does it do for you?

Many books have been written on this subject. Tai chi is a practice involving movement and balance while controlling breath and blood circulation. What I enjoy most are the two-person activities, which is a lot like dancing.