



Mike Merrill:

Hello, and welcome to The Mobile Workforce Podcast. I'm your host, Mike Merrill, and today we're sitting down with Robin Thorne. And Robin is the President and CEO of CTI, an engineering firm that provides environmental safety compliance, and also construction management services. Robin is also the founder of DemoChicks, a nonprofit organization that introduces girls and young ladies to non-traditional careers, and empowers the women in them. So in today's episode we're going to talk with Robin about the process of going from a paper-based to a cloud-based business, and why cloud computing is needed to grow your business, and the importance that it is to small businesses and owners to be able to work from anywhere. So welcome, Robin, so grateful to have you on, and looking forward to the discussion today.

Robin Thorne:

Well, thank you for having me, I'm really excited about sharing this information.

Mike Merrill:

That's awesome. Well I think to start out, I just wanted to ask you, what do you think it looks like for a business to run with the right software and systems, versus companies that haven't figured that out yet?

Robin Thorne:

Well, I would say that the businesses run more efficiently, so it's nice to be able to open a file once you receive it. If you don't have the proper software you might have challenges opening files. Another issue would be if you don't have a PDF software, you can't make changes, so you might have to seek out a free service that you can only access three times within so many hours, and so if you have to make additional changes you have to sit there and wait until you're able to make changes. So it just helps you to run more efficiently.

Mike Merrill:

So what I'm hearing there is that sometimes freeware is not a better answer because you're gaining inefficiencies that you'd be better off spending a little bit of money on, is that right?

Robin Thorne:

Exactly.

Mike Merrill:

Awesome. So in your particular case, how did investing in cloud technology alleviate the challenges that you had?

Robin Thorne:

Well, the things that I mentioned were the challenges that we had, and so it just helped us to operate a lot smoothly. Plus it's empowering, right? It's empowering when you're able to do the work. And it's interesting because as a small business sometimes people don't expect you to be able to operate efficiently. I've had people come on board and they would use the freeware, and I would tell them, "Wait a minute, we have Adobe Pro, we can do anything with the PDF." And so it's exciting, any even when we share that with our staff they're like, "Wow, that's great," because wherever they came from maybe didn't have it. So I would say, believe it or not, having the right software is actually empowering.

Mike Merrill:

That's awesome. So were there hurdles in making that transition, or challenges that you encountered or were able to overcome, or that were intimidating for you?

Robin Thorne:

Yeah, actually the biggest hurdle was me. Yeah, because, so I had a software, and we were operating

professionally and efficiently, I thought, but it was just me. I was a solopreneur, and as I brought people on board maybe to consult, I could create their email address, I mean, it was fine. And then when I finally decided to look into outsourcing IT, and he was trying to get me in the cloud, it was uncomfortable, because it was different, and I wanted everything to be on my PC. It was like, what does that really mean, being on the cloud? And because I had set up my systems, everything was personal, so we had to go from personal to business. And then he was telling me each person we brought on board had to have their own license, and I'm like, well that's money.

So it was just things like the additional expenses that I wasn't accustomed to, and it didn't cost that much, but it was just mindset, getting beyond me, and then trusting that this person actually knew what they were talking about, and the systems they were introducing would actually work and help us to be more efficient.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, I love that. So if you could share with the listeners, what are some tips or thoughts that you've had that you could share with others that maybe a small business owner looking to make these types of changes like you already did, is there any hints you could give them?

Robin Thorne:

I would suggest that they do research independently of the person who's trying to sell them the service, just to research and find out what other people are doing, like talk to other small business owners, because oftentimes sales folks may try to sell you more than what you need. And that was a concern of mine, do we really need all of this? Or do we really need that program? So it's important for them to understand what their needs are in terms of software, and talk to other people to get information from them.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, I think that's wise for sure, and I know even in our software technology business it's the same thing, we usually analyze multiple solutions, and get presentations, and talk to customers, and go through a pretty in depth vetting before we make a large

investment because, I'm sure as you can attest, it's not just a cost of the software, but also your resources and the time and the wages that you have to pay to learn and get trained. And then if it doesn't work, then you're going to have to spend even more money to switch and to invest in something new and go back through it all over again, right?

Robin Thorne:

Right.

Mike Merrill:

So in your particular case, how did you handle rolling out new software systems in your small business?

Robin Thorne:

Well, once I saw that having my IT outsourced, it was less responsibility for me, that's one less thing that I had to do. So we have employees who work offsite, and our client doesn't pay. So we have people who work offsite, and our contract does not include IT support. So if we have IT issues, we have to be able to resolve them. And I wanted to show my client that we were a professional organization and we were able to deliver on the service, so I didn't need to show up trying to fix my employees IT issues, it was better for me to be able to send someone who was a professional who knew exactly what he was doing. And so that was one of the, so a contract was one of the factors that contributed to me deciding to outsource.

Mike Merrill:

Okay, and going through that journey of growing to where you were, you mentioned the word solopreneur, I like that term, to actually having staff and other people that you needed to involve, you mentioned that you found that you were the bottleneck, sometimes you had to get out of the way. Dive a little bit deeper on that, how important was having cloud technology in helping you to work through that?

Robin Thorne:

Well, having the cloud technology meant that I didn't always have to be involved, because they didn't have to ask me to send them a file, or where is this filed?

It was in SharePoint, that's what we use, we use the SharePoint system. So we have a filing system where things are categorized and people have access to it. So they didn't have to wait to find out where documents were, or wait for me to send them a document, they had access to it.

Mike Merrill:

So it sounds like there was actually quite a good time savings of your own personal time as well to not have to hand them and deliver everything to them and direct them in every case where they just had access on their own, is that right?

Robin Thorne:

Absolutely, yes. And they had access to the latest version too, didn't have to go check through your emails to see what was said, and when was it sent. You know how you create documents and you call it version one, version two, version three, and people still mess that up, but being able to go into SharePoint, you know that the document there is the latest and the greatest.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, so you're saying if there's a change order or something, somebody's not accidentally working all off of the old version, is that right?

Robin Thorne:

That's if everyone is following the protocol, because there's a human factor, so there's a chance for error, but we set up the systems in a way to make it more efficient, and we have to train people and retrain people. And then there's someone that has to do a quality check to make sure that the files are being filed properly.

Mike Merrill:

Okay, so you're talking about collaborating with people on your team, but it also sounds like there might be value in what you can share with external folks like your customers, is that right?

Robin Thorne:

Well, one of the things that we were able to do is we have subcontractors that work on certain projects, and instead of having to email back and forth with them we're able to create a new folder and give them access to only that folder, so they don't have access to all our other intellectual property, and interact with them. So there's no emailing back and forth, the files are stored there. And sometimes the issue is that the file is large and it's difficult to email something large, or we're sharing photos. So we can provide our subs with access to a folder and be able to work with them more efficiently as well.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, that's nice. So are there some other examples of where technology really helped you to keep a project going when you ran into issues, any examples you could share?

Robin Thorne:

Well, there was an incident where I was giving a speech back in my alma mater, Drexel University, give them a shout out.

Mike Merrill:

Nice.

Robin Thorne:

And I was working on my speech on my laptop, and so I decided to stay on campus overnight, at the hotel, and I left my laptop at home. And I was thinking, wow, I wasn't finished with my speech, I need to read over what I wrote, and I was able to use my mother's iPad to log into the cloud to access my speech. And that was amazing, I said, this made it all worthwhile.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, that's a great example, actually. Not only, like you mentioned, not only more current versions of things, but even for your own self, where that cloud has just right where you left off at the last moment, as opposed to trying to back something up, or email something to yourself, or go through those other steps, so that's a

great example. Any other, job application side of things, that come to mind?

Robin Thorne:

Well, one of the things I think is really important, as a safety company we do site inspections, and this is something that we're working to perfect because I always think, there's always a human factor, you have to consider that with technology. And so if I have an inspector out on site, and for some reason he loses the documentation. Because sometimes what people will do, they'll have a checklist, a paper checklist, and they're checking off, and they're recording their inspection there, but it's better to have an electronic device, a iPad, or a tablet, and be able to enter the information and upload it in real time. And so whether that inspector makes it home, they decide to run off to Tahiti or wherever, we still have the documentation. Because there's nothing like telling the client, oh yeah, we were out at your site, we did the inspection, but we lost all the paperwork, can we come out again?

Mike Merrill:

Oh wow, yeah. So do you feel like that has helped you to win additional business, or look better for a client? I mean, are there some examples where just because of this type of technology adoption, it really blessed your business in other ways than just that one particular situation?

Robin Thorne:

Well, it's a competitive advantage, it's something that we can sell, because when we're out marketing, there's always what sets you apart from everyone else, and we can sell that as one of our competitive advantages, is that something that we can offer.

Mike Merrill:

So you're actually marketing that you use these type of technologies, and because of that you're actually a better service provider for your customers.

Robin Thorne:

Absolutely.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, I love that. So as we know, and you've alluded to a little bit, technology and software systems, some of them are cheap, but some of them certainly aren't. So how does somebody measure the benefits or the ROI for systems like these before they take that plunge and make sure that they actually get that return on their investment?

Robin Thorne:

Well, for us it wasn't really an issue of measuring the return on investment, it was something that was done out of necessity. You either operate efficiently, or you struggle. You either try to send this large file, or you go to Dropbox. How do we send this, do you use this system, do you use that system? No, you share it. So I think it was more just out of necessity, and it just made sense. And when I look back on it, it's not that big of an expense.

One of the challenges for me, like I said, I had to get out of my own way, each time someone came on board we had to pay a monthly fee, but it's not that big of a monthly fee. So for them to have access to the Office 365, for them to have access to Adobe Pro, it's just the cost of doing business. We're a small operation, we're about 13 employees, so we have 13 licenses, and it pays for itself over and over and over, because initially I used to think, well, does that person really need Adobe Pro? Do they need a full license? No, we need to make sure that all of our people are fully equipped at any given time if they need any of the software, and that's just a decision that I made after I saw how easily it was to function with these services, or with this software.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, it reminds me of the old adage, tripping over dimes to pick up pennies. Sometimes we look at it that way, and what you're saying is no, you're passing in pennies so you can pick up dimes, is that right?

Robin Thorne:

That's what I'm saying, absolutely.

Mike Merrill:

So within, it sounds like you've brought up Adobe, you've got Dropbox. I think just casually speaking about this I heard you mention at least five or six different solutions. Are there any that you still use today that are installed systems, or is your whole business online?

Robin Thorne:

Oh, that's funny too, because part of the transition was, because remember when you used to actually install programs on your computer? Now, so every things in the cloud. That was a tough one. All of our programs are in the cloud, so you don't have to get the latest version, you don't have to go out and buy and install, they're all in the cloud. There's nothing that's loaded on our computers. I mean, we have one employee who's, and they just went into the cloud. One employee about three years ago when we hired him, we purchased the software, and then when we renewed last year, it was a different version, and it was the cloud version. So even they're in the cloud, so no, all of our software is pretty much in the cloud. And I mentioned Dropbox because early on that's what we used, and my IT tech, he tells me, "You don't need any of those things," but sometimes it's hard to let go. It's hard to go If you're accustomed to using Dropbox and some of the other programs where you store all your documents.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, no question about it. And it's interesting, it sounds almost like on this discussion you discovered, oh wait, we are in fact entirely on the cloud. And maybe it happened right underneath your feet and you almost didn't realize it, is that right?

Robin Thorne:

I didn't realize it, I'm thinking, wow, that's true. And when he told me I'm thinking, how can Word be in the cloud, and my documents are on my computer. And then I said, you know what? He's a professional, he knows what he's doing. He's vetted, he's been doing this for years, just trust the process. Okay, but one thing, I did not want to let go of my desktop. Now I do have a laptop, but I just said, I don't want to have to carry my laptop with me all the time. What if I don't want to carry it? And so I was determined to keep my desktop. He tried to take it from me and I was no. So

we all do have laptops, I have a laptop, but I just don't want to carry it all the time.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, fascinating. I've noticed that in my life too, everything that I have is mobile, everything that I have is in the cloud, so it's hard to buy on premise enterprise software anymore that could even be installed even if you wanted to. So what about printing? I mean, is this type of technology adoption allowing you to not have to print so many things like you may have had to do in the past?

Robin Thorne:

I actually like to print. I don't like to print 100 page documents, but I do like to print to proofread. And also when you think about ergonomics, just being on the computer all the time, sometimes I look at my staff and I say, how can I get them off of the computers? Because that's all we do, all day we're on the computers, you got the carpal tunnel issues, you got things going on, and so I actually encouraged them to print things sometimes to read, to proofread especially. But other than that, it works with the technology. Because another thing, we're wireless in the office, and I didn't know you could be wireless in the office, you have to have the wires coming out of the walls. Not necessarily. Our phones are wireless inside the office, and the printing is wireless. It's just amazing how much can happen out in the cloud.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, that's another great example of the benefits that this type of technology provides to us. One thing I'm hearing is that you've mentioned trust the process and recognize that you're often dealing with professionals, even if they're in sales, they might be trying to sell you an upgraded module or something, potentially a little more than you might require immediately, but if you're vetting things properly and you put a little bit of trust in the technology side of things, it sounds like it's been a blessing for your business and you recommend that others do the same. Is that where you're landing on this?

Robin Thorne:

Absolutely, and you also have to think about where you're going, because that was one of the challenges. He kept saying, "Well, when your folks are doing reports out in the field and they need to upload them to the cloud," and at the time nobody was really doing the reports out in the field and I was, "Oh, we don't need to do that, it's okay, it's all right, we don't have as many people as your other clients so we're good with the paperwork," and look at where I am today, everything that he told me two years ago, we're doing it. So the expectation as a small business is that you're going to grow, so you may have to grow into your software, but just don't overdo it.

Because there's, outside of the cloud, there's the CRM, there's project management software, there's all this software that I felt the time we spent trying to manage it would be wasting time. So at this point we don't need all of that software. So just knowing what you need, and what you'll need maybe in a year, so you can grow into it, as opposed to just having all this software just to have it and it really doesn't help you because it takes more time to figure it out, or you're forced to use it. If you have a CRM, if you have a Salesforce with a CRM and you need that, or can you use an Excel spreadsheet for now? What is it that you need?

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, that's great advice. I think one of the other things that I'm hearing you say is that there should be some kind of reasonable expectation on not just cost, but the timeline. Can you talk about that just a little bit more?

Robin Thorne:

Yeah. And it depends on the type of business you do because our projects, so our projects don't have 15 steps, or the steps aren't all laid out. One step is predicated on the previous steps, so we may not be able to lay them all out. So some of the software, project management software, requires that you lay out all the steps and the timelines, and so on and so forth, but that doesn't always work for us. In wanting to appear professional or be efficient we try to use them, and I struggle with it. Why isn't this working? Well, the

types of projects that we have, that's not the type of software we could use. So just being mindful of the application and if it really applies to your business.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, lots of great nuggets of wisdom here, we've really appreciated having you on to discuss these. So as a takeaway, is there one main point that you hope people walk away with from listening to our discussion today?

Robin Thorne:

I would say be open to change, be open to change, but also be wise. Don't change for the sake of change, but do it because you're ready to grow, there's a need for it. If your systems are archaic, just be open to having someone show you a new way of operating and making your operations more efficient. Just be open minded and get out of your own way.

Mike Merrill:

Oh, that's great stuff. So a couple of quick questions before we wrap up, if you're all right with it. What's one thing that you're grateful for in your professional life?

Robin Thorne:

I would say all the opportunities that are being presented to me. I mean, I worked very hard over the years, and one of the things I always say is that you have no control over the result. You don't know when the results are going to come, or when the win is going to come, but I'm seeing years of work and networking and blood, sweat, and tears, and my phone is just constantly ringing. Opportunities are popping up, and we're landing contracts, and so I would say I'm seeing the fruit of my labor, so I'm really excited about that, the hard work is paying off.

Mike Merrill:

That's awesome, I love that. So to wrap up, last question, what is Robin's superpower? When you put your cape on, before you get ready to do something cool, what do you feel like that strength is for you?

Robin Thorne:

I would say that my superpower is caring and being concerned for others, because it's not always about the dollar, that's not always the bottom line. When you look at people that you do business with, you look at people that we employ, they're people first, and we want to interact and do business with people that we feel good about, people that have integrity, people who are honest. So I always share with my team that every opportunity isn't the best opportunity, everything that glitters isn't gold. And with my employees, I tell them that what's most important, yes, we want them to come to work, We want them to be efficient, and all of that, but we also want them to be able to take care of their families, because that's what's important. So if your kid has a soccer game, get your work done, but go to that soccer game. Don't be afraid to take time of to spend with your family. Money's good, but people are important as well.

Mike Merrill:

That's awesome. Well I love that, and it's been really fun getting to know you and have this conversation today. We're so grateful that you joined us, and I hope that your message will inspire and resonate with others that are either in your boat, or working towards being in the boat that you're in, so thanks again for joining us.

Robin Thorne:

All right, well thank you for the opportunity to share all of the things that I've learned along the way, I hope that it helps someone.

Mike Merrill:

Fantastic, you bet. All right, take care.