

# MicroScope

INDISPENSABLE CHANNEL ANALYSIS

SEPTEMBER 2023

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Dell goes partner-first with storage portfolio

How to bridge the channel's skills gap for a stronger, better workforce

We look at the progress made so far in 2023

Five-minute interview: Netwrix's Ken Tripp talks about being in a revenue business, understanding MSPs, and levelling up his culinary skills

## The uphill struggle for success

Experts take stock of the highs and lows faced so far by the channel this year



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# Weather the storm for fairer days ahead

For most people, it has been profits and revenues that have decided if this past financial year was a good one or not. Perhaps 2023 is going to be about other metrics, like taking market share or progress made on the sustainability front. That's because the chances are that this will be remembered for being a tough one. The feature in this issue shares thoughts from a wide selection of channel folk about how the year has gone so far and – like so many things – it depends on your perspective.

If you have been selling infrastructure, cloud services and security, then it has likely been an okay time – many of the business that was delayed by the pandemic has come through and the phones have kept ringing.

However, if you depend on [laptop and PC sales](#), then this has been a year when 20% declines have become the norm, with undoubtedly tough both commercial and consumer markets.

The silver lining is that things will get better – this will probably in 2024 in earnest, rather than in the next few weeks, as inflation hopefully continues to fall and the temptation to continue raising interest rates is avoided.

Before everyone draws a line through 2023, however, it is worth stating that this has not been a wasted year. Movement towards [net-zero carbon emissions](#) has accelerated across the channel. The commitment to the next generation and developing skills has also continued, even in the face of the trend by many vendors to cull staff.

The channel has weathered economic storms before, but what makes this one different is the undeniable reliance that every customer has on technology. Cutting budgets is going to be anti-competitive, cause technical debt and expose firms to increased security risks.

So, how has 2023 gone so far? It's been tough, but the channel has worked hard and continues to do so to make sure that customers are still served and protected. ■

*Simon Quicke, editor*

**THE CHANNEL HAS WEATHERED ECONOMIC STORMS BEFORE, BUT WHAT MAKES THIS ONE DIFFERENT IS THE UNDENIABLE RELIANCE THAT EVERY CUSTOMER HAS ON TECHNOLOGY**

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# Dell goes partner-first on storage portfolio

*Vendor will hand the channel a significant amount of its storage-focused business as it looks to drive increased sales through partners after success in going channel-first in other areas of the business. [Simon Quicke](#) reports*

**D**ell has taken the decision to go channel-first on its storage portfolio, significantly raising the volume of business that will go through the channel.

The vendor has chosen a moment when the spotlight is firmly on data and generating insights through tools such as generative artificial intelligence, as customers across all verticals look to drive further digital transformation.

Rob Tomlin, vice-president of UK channel at Dell Technologies, said what partner-first means in practical terms is incentives for the Dell sales team to push business to partners and an expectation that nearly all the [storage business](#) will now be going through the channel.

“With this announcement, over 99% of Dell’s customers and potential customers will be considered partner-first,” he said. “[Dell](#) will be paying our sales reps more, which is the first time that’s ever happened, to sell storage through the channel, accelerating commission.”

## PARTNER PROTECTION

“At the same time, we’ll also be protecting our partners, so when they bring customers to us, we have something called partner of

record,” said Tomlin. “When they sell to that customer, they then get protected for the next three years. And our partner record programme will be quadrupled, so we’ll have four times the number of customers protected.

**“WITH THIS ANNOUNCEMENT,  
OVER 99% OF DELL’S CUSTOMERS  
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BE CONSIDERED PARTNER-FIRST”**

ROB TOMLIN, DELL TECHNOLOGIES

“There’s a lot going on in the market today, and the momentum the market has with the boom of data is immense,” he added. “It creates a big opportunity for our partners and a big opportunity for our customers to see what they can do with their data and what they can do with modernising the infrastructure as they go forward.”

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Tomlin said that when the vendor had previously made the decision to go partner-first in other areas of the business it had delivered results.

"We went channel-first in the UK in a number of areas of our business just over two years ago now, and the impacts were immense for us," he said. "We had fantastic growth. [The storage] announcement, which is a global announcement, really accelerates that."

### CHANGE OF APPROACH

The latest move is one that has also been influenced by partners who signalled their desire for a change of approach on the storage front.

"They fed back to us that if we were to remove any ambiguity from our go-to-market, it will increase the amount of investment they make and the collaboration you have with those in the field every single day," said Tomlin.

Adrian McDonald, president of EMEA at Dell Technologies, said storage was a crucial area for those customers looking to the channel to help them drive digital transformation.

"If you talk to the companies who are moving fastest in the market nowadays, the number one thing they're focused on is data purity, and they're focused on the disciplines of having reliable, fresh, usable data that will allow them to get the insights they want to get in the right way going forward," he said.

"There's a huge amount of work done around ensuring the quality of data is of the standard required," added McDonald. ■



Rob Tomlin, Dell:  
"We went channel-first in the UK in a number of areas of our business just over two years ago, and the impacts were immense. We had fantastic growth. [This] announcement really accelerates that"

# How to bridge the channel's skills gap for a stronger, better workforce

*Hayley Mooney, general manager UK at Crayon, shares some ideas on how to navigate the talent shortage, including improving the attraction of STEM careers to students and continuously building skills at work*

In my role, I encounter two distinct situations that highlight the [skills challenge](#) faced in the UK channel sector.

The first is, perhaps unsurprisingly, when I look at what's coming in the business's project pipeline. The market offers a wealth of opportunities, and I'm certain that I'm not alone in feeling the pressure to build up the teams we need to meet that demand at pace. It's about technical skills, of course, especially in terms of emerging, transformative technologies for which genuine expertise is still incredibly scarce. But it's also about finance, sales, operations, management, and everything else that needs to come together for achieving successful and valuable execution.

The second scenario is when I go out to local schools as a STEM ambassador. There, I'm faced with a very different set of questions: it's about what children need to envision themselves in a technology career. It involves breaking down stereotypes, [especially regarding gender](#), and a lot of broadening students' sense of [what a technology career might look like](#). Given that our sector isn't widely known even among adults, it's hardly

surprising that discussing it in schools tends, initially, to be met with blank stares.

Painting that picture for them – of the channel's role as a broker of technology, executing major deals, enabling businesses by solving problems, bringing together different skills for a common purpose – and seeing interest start to spark is hugely rewarding, but it's also a long road that needs perseverance.

## **MANY TRIBUTARIES, ONE RIVER**

Caught between the bedrock of early education and the hard place of building up capacity to deliver on accelerating digitisation demands, the channel faces a complex environment in which to carefully navigate and address its skills needs.

That environment includes making sure that the right links are being built with universities showcasing the channel as a viable and attractive career path for new graduates. There is a particular challenge here as technologists often see vendors as their natural home, and the channel therefore needs to make a compelling case to attract fresh thinking.

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It also includes refining and expanding apprenticeship schemes, ensuring that there's a wide range of routes into the industry so that candidates from all backgrounds feel that it is accessible to them. From personal experience, I have seen that when given the right opportunity, individuals can create significant value for clients, surprisingly quickly.

Additionally, it includes continuous improvement in terms of how [skills in the workforce are kept up to date](#), as well as provision to employees to train in new technological areas. It's a cliché to say that people are at the hearts of our businesses, but, given the distinct set of valuable channel-specific skills that employees acquire, investing in their technological knowledge can deliver outsized returns.

Moreover, the career pathway between vendors and channel businesses should not be overlooked. Here, it's important to recognise how the skills landscape for the channel is currently transforming. Over the past year, we have seen a significant contraction in workforce headcounts at many vendors – typically, though not always, this has been a corrective measure to the rapid expansion that came with pandemic-driven digital growth.

This has two potential impacts on our own skills conundrum. First, there are signs that, as [talented workers come back into the job market](#) and vendors remain wary about hiring, the pipeline of engineering talent is flowing a little more freely than it has in previous years.

Second, it means that we might expect to see a growing onus on the channel to execute the vital role of getting under the skin of clients' businesses, assuming a strategic, consultative role

of understanding their acute and chronic pain points and then developing tailored technological solutions. Whatever else the [recent downsizing activity](#) in the IT industry might signify, it represents a loss of capacity at a moment when the demand for digitisation remains high.

### LOOKING TO THE FUTURE OF CHANNEL TALENT

For the channel, it's evident that building a stronger workforce is not only crucial for our own success, but also for meeting the technological needs across almost every industry. That's why now is the right time to take a more holistic, collaborative approach for the industry to build a skilled workforce.

There's no single tactic which will solve the problem. We must carefully consider how we differentiate ourselves from the job market offered by vendors. This may involve offering a more varied career path, taking a different approach to the work-life balance, or fostering a [more inclusive culture](#).

We need to establish a clear identity that showcases the channel's opportunity to engage closely with the problems technology solves and execute solutions at a higher level. And we will need to build up the pathway into the channel for promising and established talent, starting with school outreach programmes that raise awareness around the industry's potential.

These are conversations that I and other leaders in the industry are engaging in to create a more collaborative approach to meeting the market demand for the capabilities we represent. I can't wait to see the channel take its next steps towards being the right home for highly talented workers. ■

# 2023: THE STORY SO FAR

*Before we all gear up for what will hopefully be a busy end to the year, some of the great and the good across the channel review the progress made so far in 2023. [Billy MacInnes](#) reports*



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**W**ith the halfway point for 2023 having passed by, it's worth pausing to take stock of what the year has delivered and what more to expect in the second half.

At the end of 2022, the *CompTIA IT industry outlook 2023 annual report* found that over half of channel companies were optimistic about their prospects for 2023. Only 23% were uneasy about it. More than a quarter (27%) expected revenue and profitability numbers to outperform 2022 if the IT sector performed well, but the biggest group (45%) expected results on a par with the previous year.

In May this year, Carolyn April, [CompTIA](#) senior director of industry analysis, stated: "The channel is healthy and evolving with new technology solutions, new players, new rules of engagement and new customer habits. The majority of firms feel good about business prospects, whether they're competing in the traditional arenas of reselling and infrastructure, focusing on consulting and services, or representing new and adjacent channel types."

Considering what has happened so far in 2023, that could be seen as a heartening perspective.

Rachel Rothwell, senior regional director at [Zyxel Networks UK](#), is in accordance with that view. At the end of 2022, she had claimed to be "really looking forward to 2023", adding: "I think our partners are as well...at the moment, we can see no dip in momentum. Based on our customer forecast and feedback, we can only see the positive trend continuing into 2023."

From what Rothwell has to say today, it looks as though she was right. "For us, it has been a fairly positive first half of the year," she

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says. "Of course, the wider economic situation is having an impact on everyone, but every challenge does bring opportunities.

"Moving into managed services has been and remains the biggest opportunity for partners. The skills shortage and economic pressures are driving customers of all sizes to look at outsourcing management of networks and security to third-party experts," she adds.

Before properly looking at macroeconomic factors, however, it's worth addressing the biggest story of 2023 – one that, while years in the prophesying, erupted across the headlines and discussions for the first six months of this year: generative artificial intelligence (AI).

As Edel Creely, non-executive director at [Auxilion](#), puts it, artificial intelligence and machine learning suddenly "burst to life as a reality and not a what-if".

"Businesses quite literally overnight had to have a position, a strategy, a contingency plan and seriously reassess their technology, people and process roadmaps within the context of AI," he says. "More than ever, businesses were trying to figure out how to optimise their processes and future-proof them for their evolving realities."

Howard Malloy, [Ensono](#) senior vice-president and managing director for Europe, describes the generative AI "explosion" as the most significant development of 2023, adding: "Businesses

of all sizes and across all industries [are] seeking ways to fold AI into their business operations."

This puts pressure on channel partners because, as Malloy notes, these types of rapid technological advancements "require channel partners to stay ahead of the curve and continually update their skillsets to meet evolving client needs".

## MACROECONOMIC EFFECTS

Generative AI has been the big story so far, but it hasn't been the only one. Macroeconomic factors have not exactly been beneficial in 2023. As Erik Nicolai, CEO at [Workspace 365](#) puts it, there

have been a number of major macroeconomic factors at play, leading to declining investment in tech firms, the collapse of the Silicon Valley Bank, and mass layoffs at major global tech companies.

"The knock-on effect of these struggles for the channel is tightening budgets and reducing IT spend, so illustrating value-add and impact must be a key priority for resellers,"

he says. But Nicolai believes this also represents an opportunity. "With layoffs and budgetary constraints comes demand for improved productivity from the remaining resource, so I see the challenge for the channel becoming the opportunity here, too."

He adds that resellers that can provide simple yet innovative solutions to the productivity issues affecting businesses in

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**RACHEL ROTHWELL, ZYXEL**

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the current climate “are the ones that will thrive in the second half of the year”.

Celine Cazali, [SAP's](#) UK chief partner officer, agrees that macroeconomic factors are having an effect. “We’re finding that customers need to ensure that they can prove the business case for IT transformation and deliver return on investment faster than ever – the gap between time and value has narrowed significantly,” she says. “As a result, we’re seeing a real shift from our partners to deliver projects at speed and help customers adopt and manage the change, as opposed to build customisation like they did in the past.”

Samantha Sene, channel leader for Northern Europe and Iberia at [A10 Networks](#), points to the effect of a tightening in customer budgets as organisations are under “increased pressure to prove they are delivering value”.

“It is imperative that vendors find new ways to add value in the channel,” she says. “For example, vendors should be working with partners to deliver technical and product training, working with distributors, resellers and value-added resellers to share their product-specific skills. This is especially important in helping to close ongoing cyber skills gap.”

Retaining existing customers has been a significant challenge for the channel this year, according to Charles Damerell, [SolarWinds](#) UK&I senior director, but he says the channel has a great opportunity to lead with a consultative approach. “With the ever-evolving business landscape, customers are seeking tailored solutions. By adopting a consultative approach, the channel can position itself as a trusted adviser and efficient problem-solver,” he adds.



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Damerell singles out inflation as a major factor affecting the channel. The increase in the cost of goods and services can put pressure on channel partners to increase their prices, in turn affecting customers. "Higher prices may lead to reduced demand and lower sales for channel partners, ultimately impacting their customers' purchasing power," he says, highlighting that interest rates are another critical factor.

John Pagliuca, CEO of [N-able](#), describes adapting to the ever-changing nature of the macro environment as "the new normal" in the market for the vendor and its managed service provider (MSP) partners. "Uncertainty elongates buying decisions as companies tend to measure twice before beginning a new project or committing to a large purchase," he says. "For many in IT and IT services, the cooling economy, layoffs in the tech sector, the IT talent shortage, increased security issues and constant regulatory changes have increased uncertainty, and they do pose headwinds."

But MSPs have the opportunity to help small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that require more resources and expertise to keep up with the "unprecedented" pace of change. They can "meet the challenge, speed up, and be the certainty once again", says Pagliuca.

Carlos Blanco, vice-president of channels and alliances at [Jamf](#), says macroeconomic concerns have been a driving force in the tech market. Organisations have been under pressure to focus on optimising their resources, thereby doing more with less. "Longer sales cycles and consolidation of products/vendor lines is a common theme today throughout the tech market," he notes.

Blanco says collaboration and alignment between vendors and channel partners can be a challenge: "Vendors need to ensure their partner programmes, incentives and support structures are well-defined, transparent and mutually beneficial. [Channel partners need to] adapt to evolving business models, including subscription-based services, as-a-service offerings and recurring revenue models. This transition requires the channel to reshape operations, revenue streams and customer engagement approaches."

Richard Farrell, CTO at [Netcall](#), makes an interesting point about vendors and their messaging. "With broadening product portfolios and similar messaging, it can be really difficult to understand the differences between vendor propositions," he says. "Too often, non-core solutions are weak and detract from the overall offering. The channel has a challenge to cut through the marketing noise to really understand what's best for customers."

**“THE COOLING ECONOMY, LAYOFFS,  
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**JOHN PAGLIUCA, N-ABLE**

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## A GAME OF TWO HALVES

Adam Williamson, sales director at [Exclusive Networks UK](#), describes 2023 as a game of two halves.

“The first three months were strong, but we have certainly seen the bigger deals become harder to forecast. It feels like there is so much scrutiny on any spend, with increased levels of sign-off and due diligence from end users, that it makes the channel's job hard to predict,” he says.

Looking ahead, Williamson believes the rest of the year is going to be a challenge. “There will still be scrutiny on deals, and the cycles and negotiations will be tougher. However, in these tougher times, it's important that the channel leans in and supports partners and vendors. It's not the time to sit back and batten down the hatches – we need to help create pipeline and promote financial facilities that can help bring deals forward to make sure they close in 2023,” he says.

Back in 2022, Scott Walker, EMEA channel sales director at Illumio, told MicroScope that the economic climate would accelerate the broadening of channel portfolios, adding: “As end-user organisations continue to scrutinise budgets and drive down prices, it will be the channel that will be hit hardest.”

Today, he says macroeconomic factors have, understandably, led to a greater focus on return on investment. “Companies don't mind spending money, but before they do, they want to guarantee that they will get a good return on their investment,” says Walker. “This doesn't just mean financial benefits – it could be risk reduction, reduced downtime, or improvements in operational efficiency.”

Rob Mackie, director and co-founder at Assured Data Protection, says: “Channel players are struggling to facilitate what their customers want due to the ever-changing landscape and speed of adoption into the cloud.”

While this brings opportunities for service providers and integrators that can deliver those demands, he adds that there has been “a large increase in white labelling, which is the only effective way to go to market, from a time, skill and cost basis”.

Looking forward, Mackie predicts more of the same: “The market is challenging, but there is huge opportunity for channel partners, and collaboration with special service providers is vital.”

## THE MSP POSSIBILITY

Greg Jones, EMEA vice-president of business development at [Kaseya](#), believes that despite the difficult economic situation, the market for managed service providers remains buoyant. “This is still a golden age for MSPs. Their expert support becomes even more important to clients when the going gets tough,” he says. For example, as trusted partners, they can help SMEs to automate and improve their processes to be more productive and profitable.

But things are more complicated than they were. “The challenge for MSPs is having the right conversation at the right level and at the right time,” says Jones. “Yes, budgets are tighter, but technology has become much more integral to business and plays a key role in a wide range of business functions. This means budget for new solutions could come from almost any department and isn't limited to IT anymore.”

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James Bradley, [Okta](#) vice-president of EMEA partners and alliances, echoes that view, stating that the big issue IT companies faces is in ensuring relevance for new audiences. “When we sell technology now, we’re no longer talking to a purely tech audience. We need to address the interests, needs and challenges of a much broader set of buyers than ever before,” he says. “You’re just as likely to be selling to the CMO as the CTO or an IT team, which means conversations will now be about usability and experience rather than the tech itself. This is having a significant impact on the channel as they must ensure they invest in the right people with the right skillset to have these conversations.”

Spencer Starkey, [SonicWall](#) vice-president of EMEA, says customers are looking for value from a solution or service – and if they can’t find it, they’ll go somewhere else. This presents yet another argument in favour of MSPs.

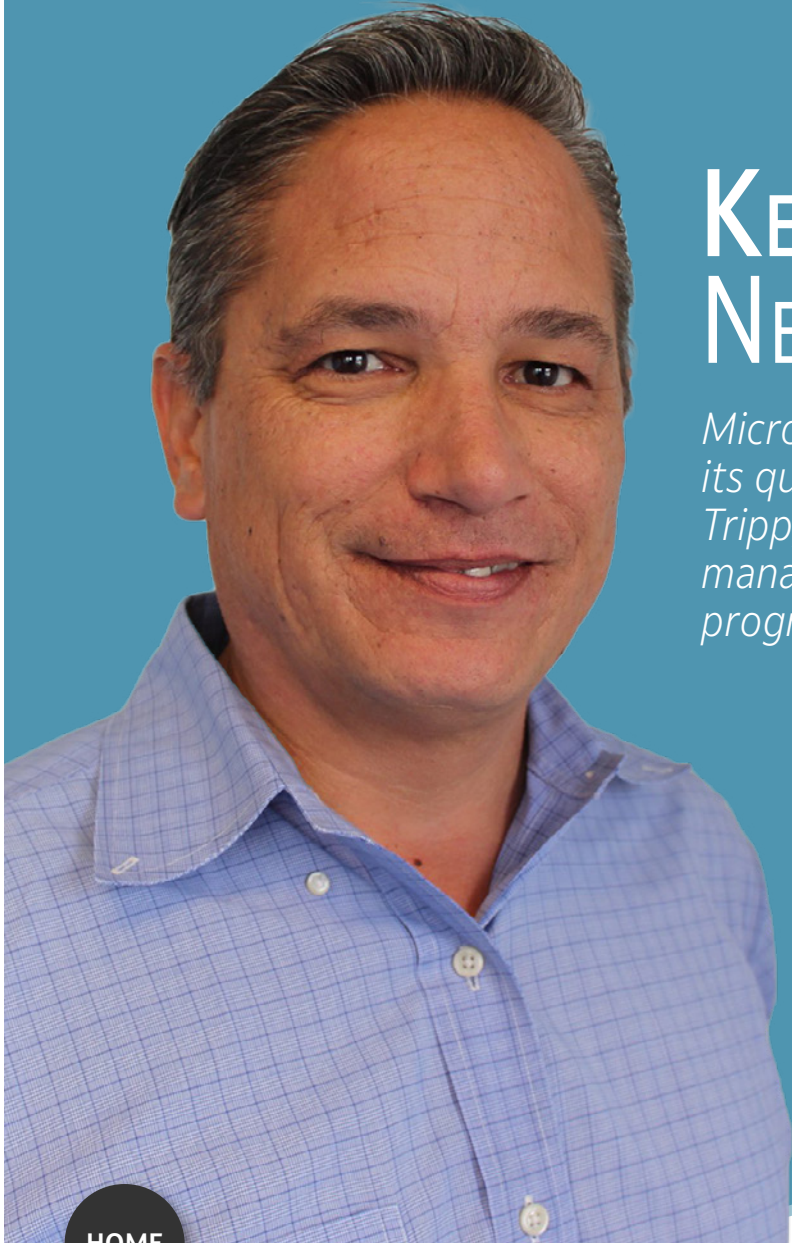
“Why is that so different?” he asks. “Because the managed service aspect is becoming increasingly relevant. Customers can

now pay monthly, rather than spend large amounts of capital on a purchase/licence upfront. Managed services help customers manage their budgets, even as security spending is increasing.”

Starkey also believes there are more job cuts to come. “We’ve seen our fair share of job cuts in 2023 in the industry and I don’t think we’ve seen the back of it either. I imagine there to be more refinement, particularly from the vendor side, especially as they become increasingly reliant on the partner,” he says.

At the end of 2022, Ed Baker, [Trellix](#) vice-president of global channel sales, argued the economic uncertainty could be a perfect time for vendors, distributors and partners to take market share and grow, adding: “In 2023, the channel should focus on attaining greater customer intimacy and understanding of their specific challenges to help unlock opportunities and drive positive customer outcomes.”

Today, he accepts that it is difficult to predict whether the economy will improve or worsen. “But the channel always finds ways to adapt and remain resilient in uncertain times,” he concludes. ■



# KEN TRIPP NETWRIX

*MicroScope puts its questions to Ken Tripp, director of the managed services programme at Netwrix*

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## **MORNING, KEN. TELL US WHAT YOU DO FOR A LIVING.**

I am director of the managed services programme at cyber security vendor Netwrix. The main goal of my role is understanding the cyber security market from the point of view of our MSP [managed services providers] partners to ensure Netwrix helps drive their growth.

Learning the challenges our partners face, the client needs they need to address, and the trends they are seeing in certain regions or verticals ensures our close engagement with them, which is my chief aim as head of the Netwrix MSP programme.

## **WHY ARE YOU THE RIGHT PERSON FOR THIS JOB?**

I am a curious person and curiosity leads to remarkable things. The cyber security market is in constant motion, continuously changing. A single entity or person cannot have all the answers.

Being able to ask why and opening your mind to thoughts and ideas from partners enables one to gain understanding and then apply strategy to an initiative. It is good to be curious!

## **WHAT GETS YOU UP IN THE MORNING?**

Unfortunately, an alarm and not the sun. Jokes aside, I have a great passion for what I do and it inspires me in the morning. I get the opportunity to create, strategise and think every day. Couple that with being in an industry that is growing exponentially, and every day presents a new challenge and a new opportunity for personal growth.

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## WHO HELPED YOU GET TO WHERE YOU ARE TODAY?

Way too many to mention...My family, teammates, colleagues and bosses. Also, cheers to those who have doubted any of us!

## WHAT IS THE BEST OR WORST BUSINESS ADVICE YOU HAVE RECEIVED?

The best piece of advice came from my current boss at Netwrix: "We are in the revenue business!" Not only does that ring true for every company I have ever worked for, but it reminds me that our partners are in the revenue business, too.

It completely changes the mindset when engaging with partners: no matter the features or functionality our technology can provide, the real question is what contribution we can make to their pipeline.

## WHAT DOES THE NEXT FIVE YEARS HOLD FOR THE CHANNEL?

I anticipate a continued transformation, from value-added reseller [VAR] to managed security service provider.

The demand for better IT security has quickly expanded from enterprises all the way to small businesses over the past four

to five years, and there are just not enough security practitioners to fill the need, nor do all businesses have the budget to hire and retain these skilled employees.

Therefore, businesses will continue to outsource this crucial component to partners that prove to be trusted advisers. I see the channel addressing the needs of the growing market by offering more and more services at scale.

## WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO SOMEONE STARTING OUT TODAY IN IT?

There are tremendous opportunities for career movement and growth in the channel, but those opportunities do not come without mastering your position first.

Always look to learn beyond your job description, but make sure to ace the test that is placed in front of you.

**“THERE ARE TREMENDOUS OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER MOVEMENT AND GROWTH, BUT THOSE OPPORTUNITIES DO NOT COME WITHOUT MASTERING YOUR POSITION FIRST. LOOK TO LEARN BEYOND YOUR JOB, BUT MAKE SURE TO ACE THE TEST IN FRONT OF YOU”**

**KEN TRIPP, NETWRIX**

## WHAT GOAL DO YOU HAVE TO ACHIEVE BEFORE YOU DIE, AND WHY?

Any goal is related to my golf game: when you reach a goal in golf, a new one is immediately set. It's always good to have a goal in life.

Home

Editor's comment

Dell goes partner-first with storage portfolio

How to bridge the channel's skills gap for a stronger, better workforce

We look at the progress made so far in 2023

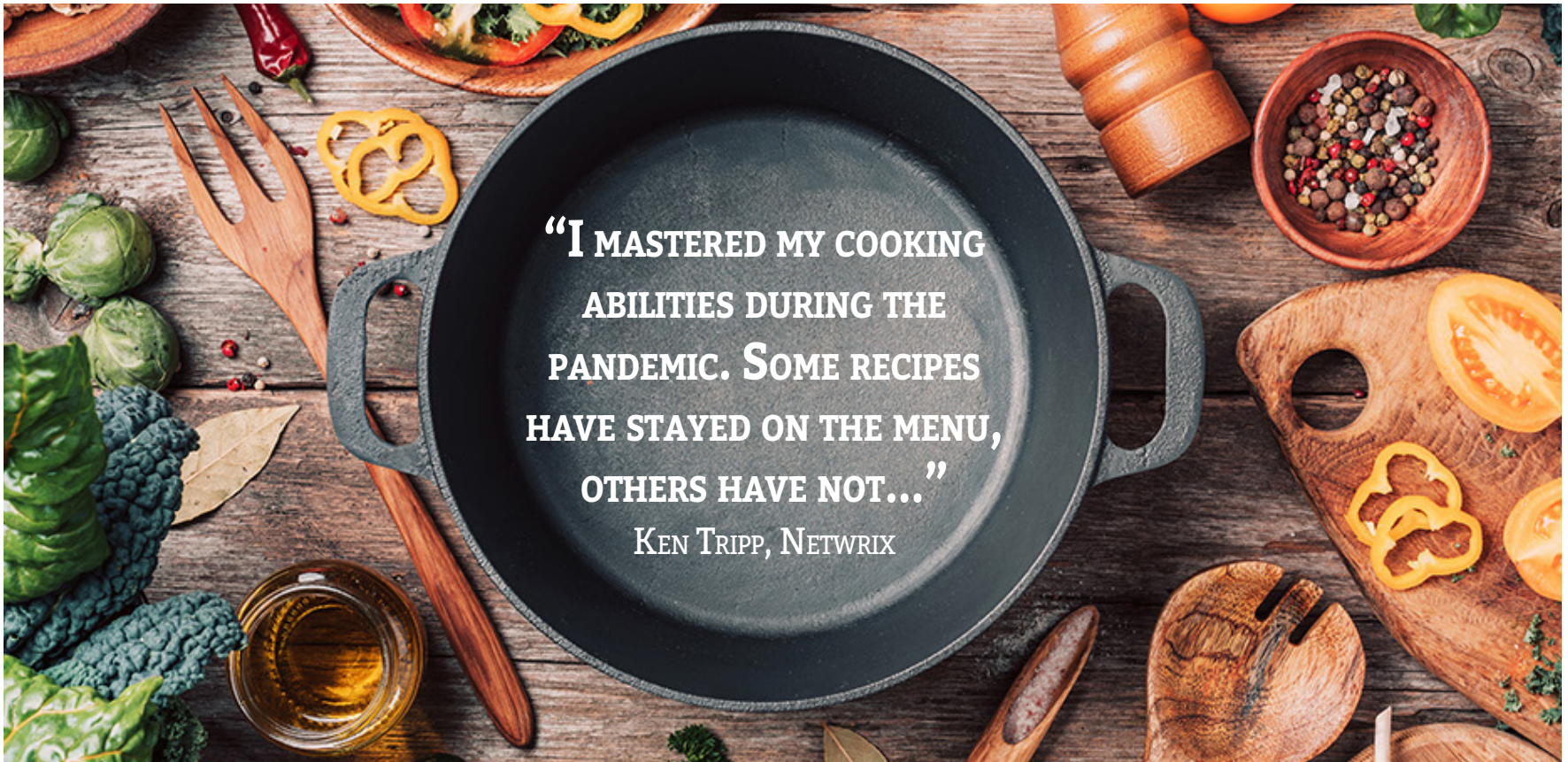
Five-minute interview: Netwrix's Ken Tripp talks about being in a revenue business, understanding MSPs, and levelling up his culinary skills

**WHAT IS THE BEST BOOK YOU'VE EVER READ?**

*30 Seconds or Less.* It's about how long you have to keep someone's attention and how to redirect the conversation to ensure the key points of your message come across. Great lesson for both business and personal life – "just get to the point!"

**HAVE YOU LEARNT ANYTHING NEW – GUITAR, PAINTING ETC – DURING THE PANDEMIC?**

I mastered my cooking abilities. I added a few new recipes to my arsenal over that time. Some have stayed on the home menu, but others have not... ■



JCHIZHE/ADOBE