

MicroScope

INDISPENSABLE CHANNEL ANALYSIS

OCTOBER 2023

Editor's comment

SCC sets course
on defining
DSSP evolution

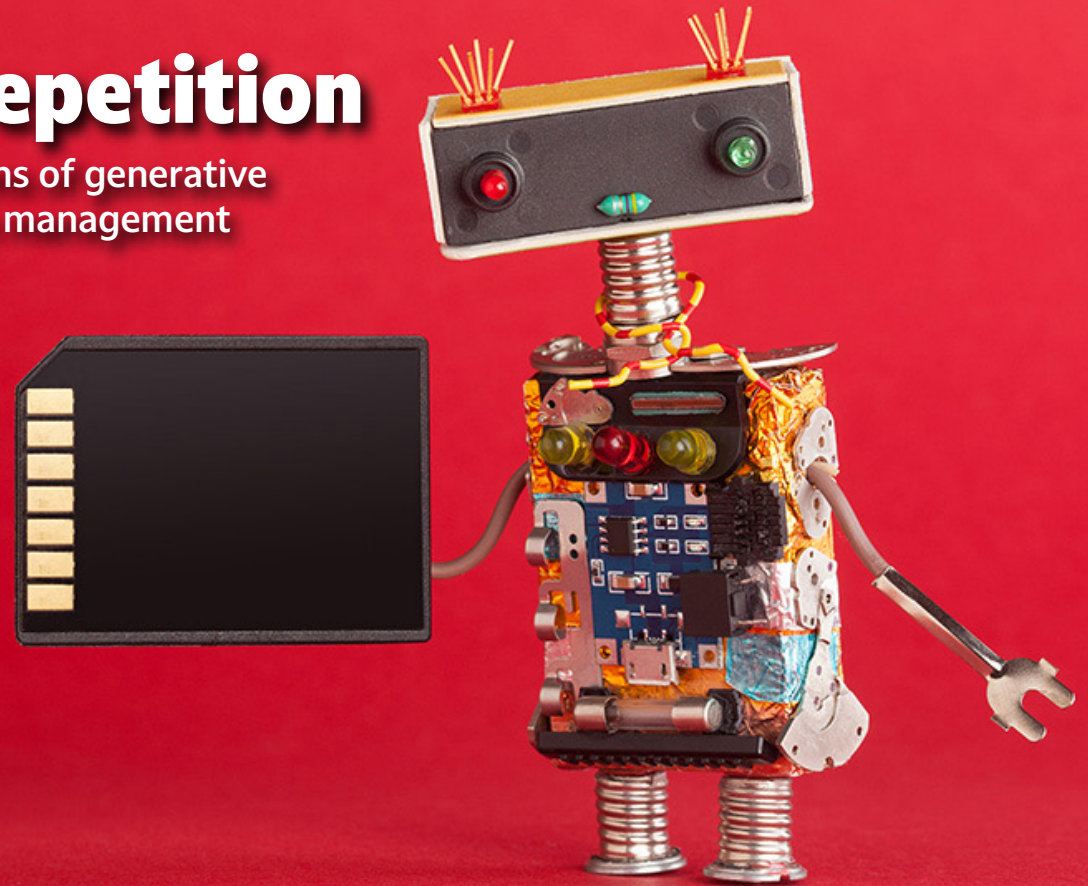
The value of ensuring
MSSPs and vendors
are on the same page

Generative AI:
Automating
storage and backup
management

Five-minute interview:
Simon Godfrey of
Secureworks, who is
King of the Mountain

Automating repetition

We look at the pros and cons of generative
AI in storage and backup management



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Fourth-quarter outlook: a bang or a whimper?

So, here we are at the start of the fourth quarter, which is traditionally the busiest period of the year for the channel. After a difficult 2023, expectations might be slightly different this time, but the pressure to hit targets and finish the year strongly remains.

Like a lot of people, I wanted to believe the idea that the second half of this year would see a recovery and the downturn would be more of a blip than something longer term.

However, as we stand here in October, it's clear that apart from some slight drops in inflation, the tense mood out there has remained in place. The reports back from the channel have been ones indicating that there is still money to be made, but it has become harder – and those with broad portfolios, or a committed play in security, have been the ones in the best position to ride out the storm.

The hope is that the desire by customers to protect cash and postpone or reduce the scope of projects will ease as they realise that things are going to recover. They will have been told about the dangers of running up technical debt and the risks of falling behind in their digital transformation strategies. Plus, the vendors are giving them reasons to spend with better and more secure products and services.

That's a long way of saying that the next three months are going to be important. Not just because they have the ability to 'save' the year for a lot of people, but in their role as a runway to better times ahead.

Most people talk of a tough November and December last year as the first indications that things were getting tough. It would be great if, this time, those months acted as the first signs that things were improving. ■

Simon Quicke, editor

THE NEXT THREE MONTHS ARE GOING TO BE IMPORTANT. NOT JUST BECAUSE THEY HAVE THE ABILITY TO 'SAVE' THE YEAR FOR A LOT OF PEOPLE, BUT IN THEIR ROLE AS A RUNWAY TO BETTER TIMES AHEAD

SCC sets course on defining DSSP evolution

The digital solution and service provider's recent acquisition of Nimble was part of a larger ambition to expand its capabilities and put the business in a position to meet changing customer needs. [Simon Quicke](#) reports

SCC has set its sights on establishing itself as a digital services player, with [its recent acquisition](#) of Nimble a key plank of that strategy.

The channel player has seen customers work increasingly with digital consultants to advise them on their adoption of more services and technologies, and has said it wants to put itself in a position to scoop up that business.

Christine Olmsted, corporate development and strategy director at [SCC](#), said the route to customers was evolving and the business wanted to get ahead of those changes.

“You’ll see a convergence in our industry over time. Even firms that have always traditionally focused on the very pointy end of strategy are coming down the food chain into the build and integrate layers of things. Infrastructure firms are coming up that layer and we’re all going to meet in the middle,” she said.

“What that means for us at SCC is being on the front foot in that transformation of our industry. This is a move for us that signals not a change in our strategy, but an expansion of our strategy. We will continue to be a modern and innovative reseller for our clients, and we will add this capability to serve them in more ways,” she added.

Olmsted revealed the initial reaction from vendors had been positive as SCC was heading in a direction that would help them to reach more customers.

“[Vendors have told us], ‘You’re building the capability we hope you’ll build to help customers evaluate the tech landscape’, and it’s really about that trusted advisory relationship with a customer to help them make decisions,” she said.

DELIVERING DIGITAL SOLUTIONS AND SERVICES

The term digital solution and service provider (DSSP) is one that SCC is likely to use a lot more going forward as it tries to clarify to users what it can deliver.

“DSSP is really about defining a new category of company – not a solution or product company or services company, but a collective company. So DSSP is a term to encompass what we, SCC, can now do,” said Olmsted.

“We can help you get great technology and source it; we can help you leverage amazing software solutions that are out there and find those; we can take your products through our recycling capability – device as a service, end-to-end, full lifecycle, down to deconstruction of it; and we can help you to solve complex

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business problems and build...software solutions to solve those problems. It's a true end-to-end [service].

"There is no category that describes that today. It's not an MSP [managed service provider] because it's a bit more complex than that. On the front end, the consulting lens, it's not a consultancy. It's a term we coined because we believe it's a new category. It's about being a go-to partner to the customer, and that's what we care about."

TRANSFORMATION AND EXPANSION WILL CONTINUE

Chris Roberts, CEO of Nimble, said his firm was bringing more digital consultancy expertise to SCC and had built a business that takes complex problems and solves them for customers.

"We're an end-to-end product and technology consultancy. We start tackling user-centred design problems quite early, [establishing] who we build products and services for, and discovering their needs," he added.

"That covers looking at personas, a zoomed-out service design, looking at what's on and off screen, and then we do a lot in the full-stack engineering space."

Olmsted said Nimble was by no means a full stop for SCC, adding that more activity on the market was planned to support the business ambition.

"We will continue to aggressively evolve SCC," she said. "We believe it's an important opportunity to transform and expand so that we can continue to be helpful to our customers in their transformation, and that means adding new capability and continuing to invest in new things." ■

SCC has coined the term "digital solution and service provider" to better describe its evolving offer to customers



Getting MSSPs and vendors on the same page

It's in the interests of vendors and managed security service providers alike to work more closely on product development, deployment and customisation, says [Matthew Rhodes](#), regional director for MSSPs at Logpoint

Managed security service providers (MSSPs) are constantly bombarded by vendors and have to do some serious due diligence to ensure the relationship will stand the test of time.

One thing they cannot afford is for the vendor roadmap to take an unexpected turn, resulting in the product no longer providing the functionality or stability required. And yet very few vendors will work closely with [MSSPs](#) when it comes to product development, which seems something of a missed opportunity.

MSSPs don't want to be limited by an interface that provides a one-size-fits-all menu of clickable boxes and buttons. For this reason, many resort to developing their own tools in-house, or augmenting those they have, to give them the ability to adapt and roll out services across their client base.

Security orchestration, automation and response ([SOAR](#)), for example, typically requires set-up, rule configuration and playbook tweaking, which can be time consuming. As a result, MSSPs tend to activate only some automation features and build custom use cases and advanced correlations together with their clients. In doing so, however, they end up missing out on some of the functionality.

BESPOKE IS NOT BEST

In-house solutions can present future challenges too, by making it difficult to introduce new features or to scale these offerings.

What MSSPs far prefer are solutions that offer out-of-the-box integrations and flexible feature sets, saving them time and effort.

**“MSSPs DON'T WANT TO BE LIMITED
BY AN INTERFACE THAT PROVIDES
A ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL MENU OF
CLICKABLE BOXES AND BUTTONS”**

MATTHEW RHODES, LOGPOINT

This is especially true for those MSSPs that bundle components together at a single price point or wish to enable their customers to plug their own technologies, such as firewalls and endpoint detection and response ([EDR](#)), into the MSSP's security incident and event management ([SIEM](#)) solution.

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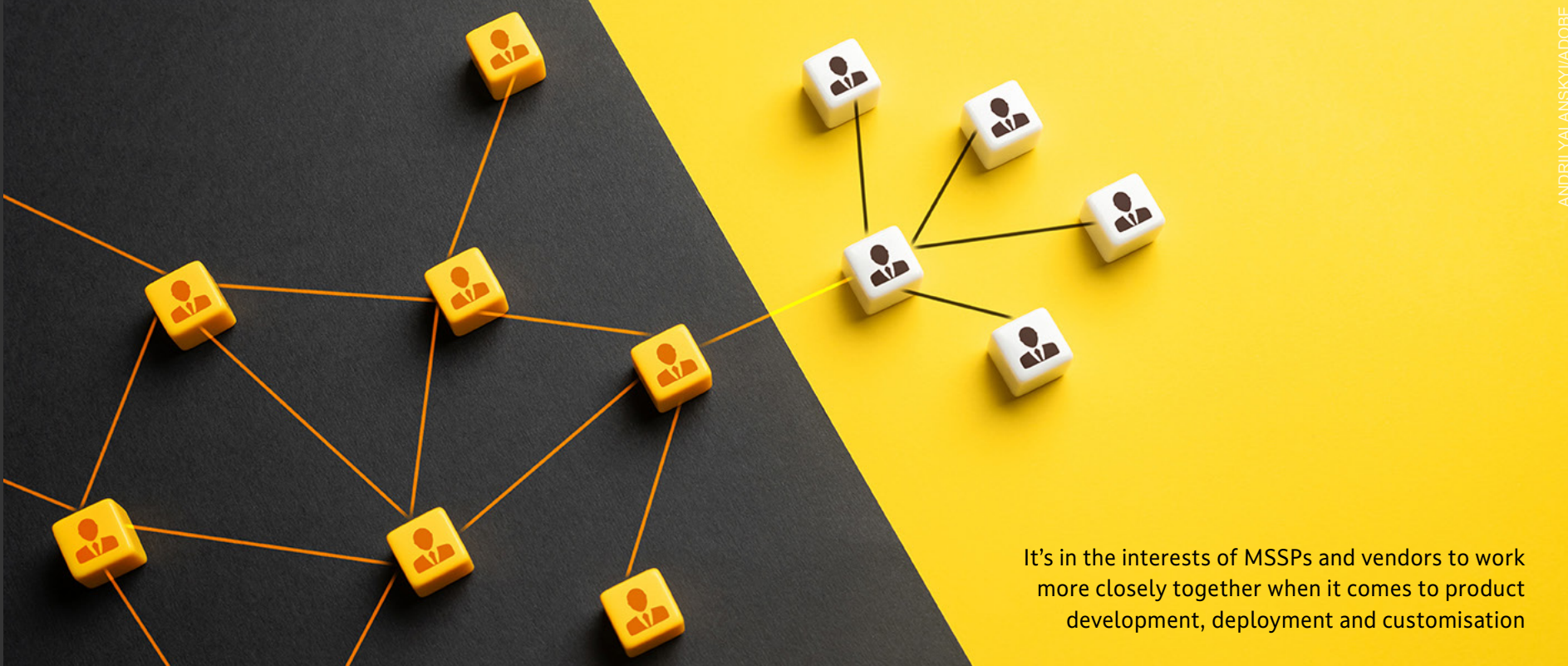
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Further complicating matters is the way security solutions are licensed. The customer base is highly price sensitive, with many organisations choosing to outsource to MSSPs to keep costs low and predictable. Consequently, MSSPs tend to be cautious about adopting new technologies as this may change the vendor licensing scheme and raise costs. This means they seek platforms and tools that can be integrated or swapped out, and that can be deployed on-premise, in the cloud or a hybrid of both, with a predictable licensing structure.

These constraints can make it highly difficult for MSSPs to exploit technologies to create new value-added service packages, which is why to move the market forward, vendors need to become more in tune with MSSP needs.

So, what would managed security service providers like to see? A recent [survey of MSSPs](#) across Europe and the US, conducted by Take Point, found unanimous demand for vendor solutions that are highly scalable, backed by support and regular updates, and offer a roadmap of advanced future features.

MSSPs revealed they want the ability to influence vendor roadmaps, in terms of feature requests and timelines, and to ensure that scalable management is factored in at the design phase. Such strong partnerships would then give the MSSP the confidence to recommend a particular solution because they would know where the vendor was headed.

Interestingly, those that had developed or tweaked solutions in-house were also keen to share their experience with vendors

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to better leverage what they had. They also said having a close working relationship with the vendor was essential to understanding the inner working of the security platform to enable them to customise it. This suggests the exchange of ideas could go both ways, helping educate vendors on how to better tailor their solutions to the MSSP market.

DEVELOPING NEW SERVICES

With regards to emerging technologies such as SOAR, it was recognised that such solutions were necessary to grow the business and provide customers with automated response, but there was reticence over deploying such technologies without vendor support. The surveyed MSSPs said they wanted flexible licensing options and hands-on training to teach their analysts how to design playbooks and implement use cases to speed response and shorten service-level agreements.

Finally, desire was also expressed for simple customer-facing dashboards that the MSSP could manage centrally for their entire customer base. Some had resorted to building this themselves to swap out solutions without disrupting the customer view, while others had used open interfaces and standard protocols to integrate solutions to provide a smooth customer experience. But there's really no reason why a pivotal technology such as SIEM cannot be used in this way as it already collects and centralises data from any device.

Ultimately, MSSPs want to bundle multiple services into a single package with a simple – and low – price tag. So, those vendors that are able to converge new technologies such as SOAR

with existing SIEM platforms, making it easier to deliver a wide array of cyber security services under a converged and predictable licensing structure, are likely to be favoured.

Going forward, it's in the interests of MSSPs and vendors alike to work more closely together when it comes to product development, deployment and customisation. Involving the MSSP in the vendor roadmap and feature request discussions can ensure the end solution has the capability to carry out incident response, for example, across thousands of customers.

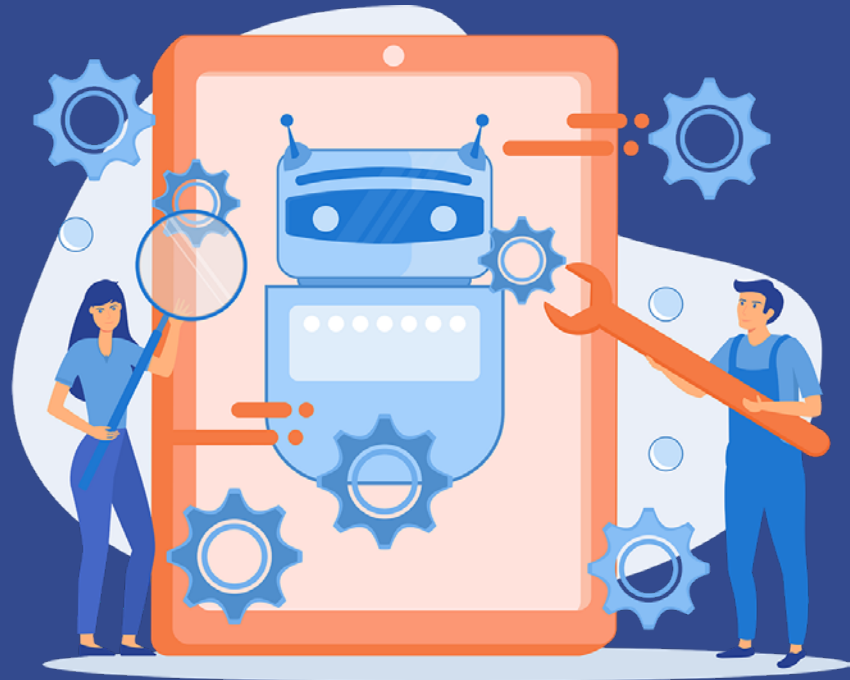
“MSSPs WANT THE ABILITY TO INFLUENCE VENDOR ROADMAPS, IN TERMS OF FEATURE REQUESTS AND TIMELINES, AND TO ENSURE THAT SCALABLE MANAGEMENT IS FACTORED IN”

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Educating MSSP analysts can give them the confidence to offer a much wider range of service options and to fully exploit the automation offered by technologies such as SOAR. And listening to how MSSPs have tweaked their tools can enable vendors to adapt their offerings and make their solutions more appealing to this important market. ■

Catch up with the latest channel news online.

GENERATIVE AI: AUTOMATING STORAGE AND BACKUP MANAGEMENT



Stephen Pritchard looks at how generative artificial intelligence is automating the monitoring of repetitive tasks, as well as the limits to its implementation

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Generative artificial intelligence (AI) – including services such as [ChatGPT and Google Bard](#) – looks like being the next wave of business automation.

In IT, a growing number of suppliers now have some AI or machine learning (ML) capabilities built into their management tools. Much of the day-to-day work of IT departments can benefit from automation, where machine learning tools can handle [vast amounts of data](#) at speeds far greater than a human analyst.

[Storage and backup](#) are obvious areas to target because they represent a significant but often repetitive workload for IT teams. Suppliers are starting to examine how generative AI, with its ability to understand and learn from data and report back in natural language can [help manage storage and backup](#).

AI 101

[Generative AI and AI based on large language models](#) (LLM) creates human-like responses to questions or prompts. The technology is already used in customer services, where “chatbots” aim to answer questions online and cut workloads for human operators. Such tools can also be used for research, to create marketing documents or even to create illustrations and artwork.

Automation takes care of repetitive tasks and prioritises issues that need to be passed to a person, and that frees up analysts to deal with more strategic tasks.

“The distinguishing advantage of generative AI is understanding context and generating relevant content,” says Kshitij

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Jain, head of analytics for the UK and Europe at EXL. One of its benefits over conventional AI is “conversational” or natural language reporting.

GENERATIVE AI, DATA AND STORAGE MANAGEMENT

So far, most suppliers work with a combination of generative AI and more conventional ML models to automate IT tasks. Generative AI is likely to play a role in the reporting side of IT management, as well as assisting IT departments with the specification and configuration of systems.

“Every day, IT teams see hundreds of predefined tasks fail,” says Mark Molyneux, EMEA chief technology officer (CTO) at Cohesity. “A backup administrator’s job is to examine, reschedule and restart any failed jobs. AI can automate any of these processes.”

AI can, he suggests, automate information gathering and find out why a task or process failed. Potentially, as organisations grow more confident in their use of AI, they could allow automated tools to fix problems too.

Cohesity also recently launched a set of tools, Cohesity Turing, which uses AI for ransomware detection and remediation. A similar approach could be extended more broadly to data management.

“AI can massively reduce the toll on IT and security teams by performing many of the important but tedious tasks itself,

and provide comprehensive reporting with clear next steps,” says Molyneux.

At Commvault, senior director of international systems engineering Jason Gerrard sees a similar picture emerging.

“It is entirely possible for AI to be used for tasks such as storage configuration, setting backups and checking compliance,” he says. “It is possible for chat tools to streamline reporting back to users, and some companies are already doing this with virtual helpdesks.”

Another notable role for generative AI is to help with IT planning, says Sam Woodcock, senior director for cloud strategy and enablement at 11:11 Systems.

“AI and ChatGPT type tools will help customers in the future make more informed and strategic decisions when it comes to procuring, architecting and deploying IT solutions,” says Woodcock.

Generative AI could help with peer reviews of systems, pricing and solution data “and be able to leverage natural language models to gain insight and information simply and easily”, he adds.

GENERATIVE AI: HANDLE WITH CAUTION?

Despite the potential, however, some industry experts remain cautious about the role of generative AI and LLMs in managing critical IT infrastructure.

“AI CAN MASSIVELY REDUCE THE TOLL ON IT AND SECURITY TEAMS BY PERFORMING MANY OF THE IMPORTANT BUT TEDIOUS TASKS ITSELF”
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To date, there are more use cases based around conventional AI and ML, as well as discriminative AI models that can be used to classify data. But generative AI and public “chatbot” services in particular come with risks.

“Rather than generative AI, traditional ML is increasingly used to provide recommendations based on data categorisation, with the aim of optimising a fleet of data platforms,” says Patrick Smith, EMEA CTO at Pure Storage.

“Storage environment reporting must be accurate. Decisions are made based on this information and any inaccuracies could

cause reliability issues or even compromise the integrity of data,” he says.

“The future of storage and backup will be driven by AI and ML, but today that’s not going to be using public chatbots,” cautions Barry Cashman, regional vice-president for the UK at Veritas Technologies. “We would strongly recommend against any business using generative AI as a component in their data protection strategy because to get any level of value, companies would need to disclose a level of business-critical data to a third party that could well put them in breach of compliance protocols.” ■





SIMON GODFREY SECUREWORKS

MicroScope puts its questions to Simon Godfrey, sales and partner go-to-market lead across Europe at Secureworks

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TELL US A BIT ABOUT WHAT YOU DO FOR A LIVING

I lead sales and our partner go to market across Europe for [Secureworks](#).

WHY ARE YOU THE RIGHT PERSON FOR THIS JOB?

I have the experience to understand the nuances of our European regions and how to work best with our strategic partners and customers no matter where they are located. I've always worked within security technologies and solutions, giving me a deep understanding of the market and the challenges organisations face. And importantly, I have worked with channel partners, who are crucial in enabling us scale. The most interesting shift I've seen is the move from highly customised, largely passive [security information and event management \(SIEM\)](#) and monitoring solutions with limited focus on threat detection to packaged [software-as-a-service \(SaaS\)](#) solutions focused on delivering better security outcomes, with fast responses.

WHAT GETS YOU UP IN THE MORNING?

I have always been a self-starter. I'm driven by helping to support our customers achieve things they would not be able to without Secureworks. It's also important to me to be able to support my family and open up opportunities for them as well.

WHO HELPED YOU GET TO WHERE YOU ARE TODAY?

I have worked with a number of highly skilled team members, managers and business owners over the years. Each of them had different styles, motivations

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and approaches, but all these experiences have helped me develop into the business leader I am today – and I am still learning every day.

WHAT IS THE BEST OR WORST BUSINESS ADVICE YOU HAVE RECEIVED AND FROM WHOM?

The best advice I've been given was to be sensitive – to the individual or situation – and to always remain professional. Set clear expectations with people of what you expect and what they can expect from you. Be direct but with empathy.

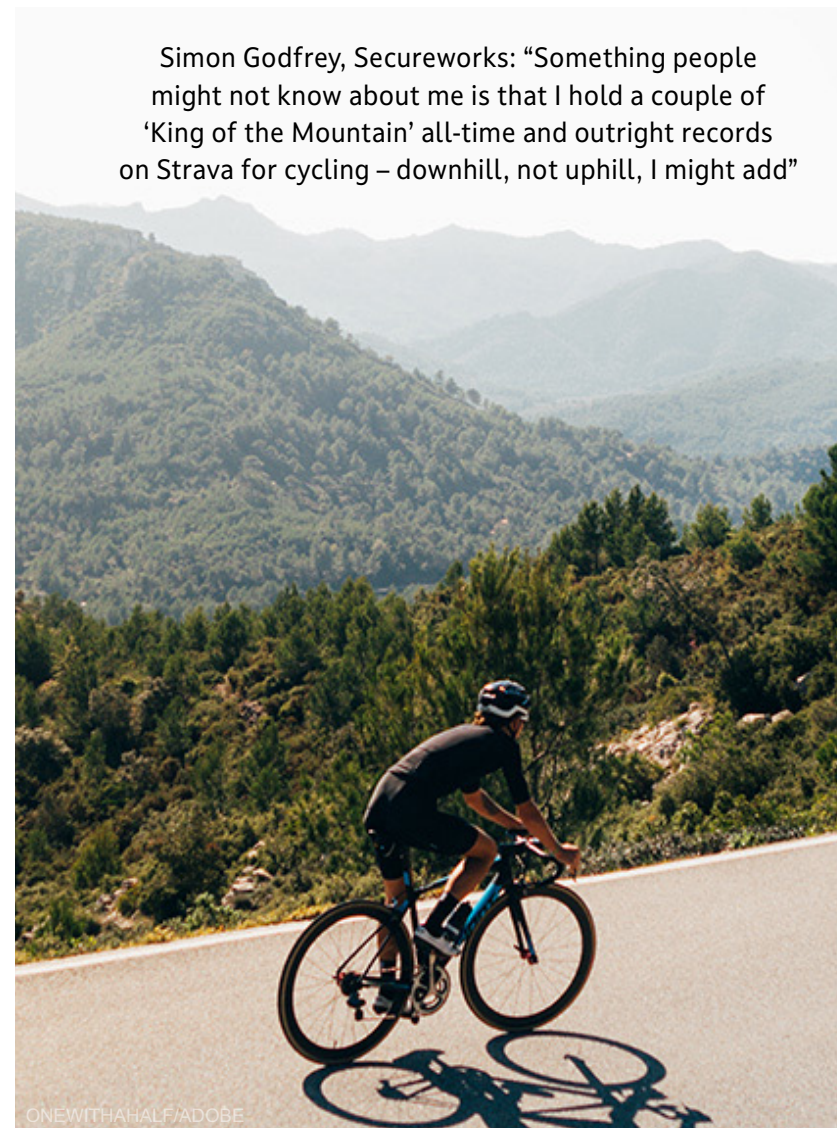
WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO SOMEONE STARTING OUT TODAY IN IT?

The best advice I would offer someone starting out today is to get into a company that will invest in you. It's crucial to develop additional skills and competencies as you grow into a role. The best organisations also offer movement within the organisation to experience different areas of the business so that you can find the best role for you, which might not be the one you thought it would be when you started.

WHAT DOES THE NEXT FIVE YEARS HOLD IN STORE FOR THE CHANNEL?

Vendors that want to grow are embracing the opportunity and the scale the channel offers. And businesses that are struggling to plug the technology skills gap stand to gain significant benefits from working with great partners. As we see technology continue to grow and develop, the role of

Simon Godfrey, Secureworks: "Something people might not know about me is that I hold a couple of 'King of the Mountain' all-time and outright records on Strava for cycling – downhill, not uphill, I might add"



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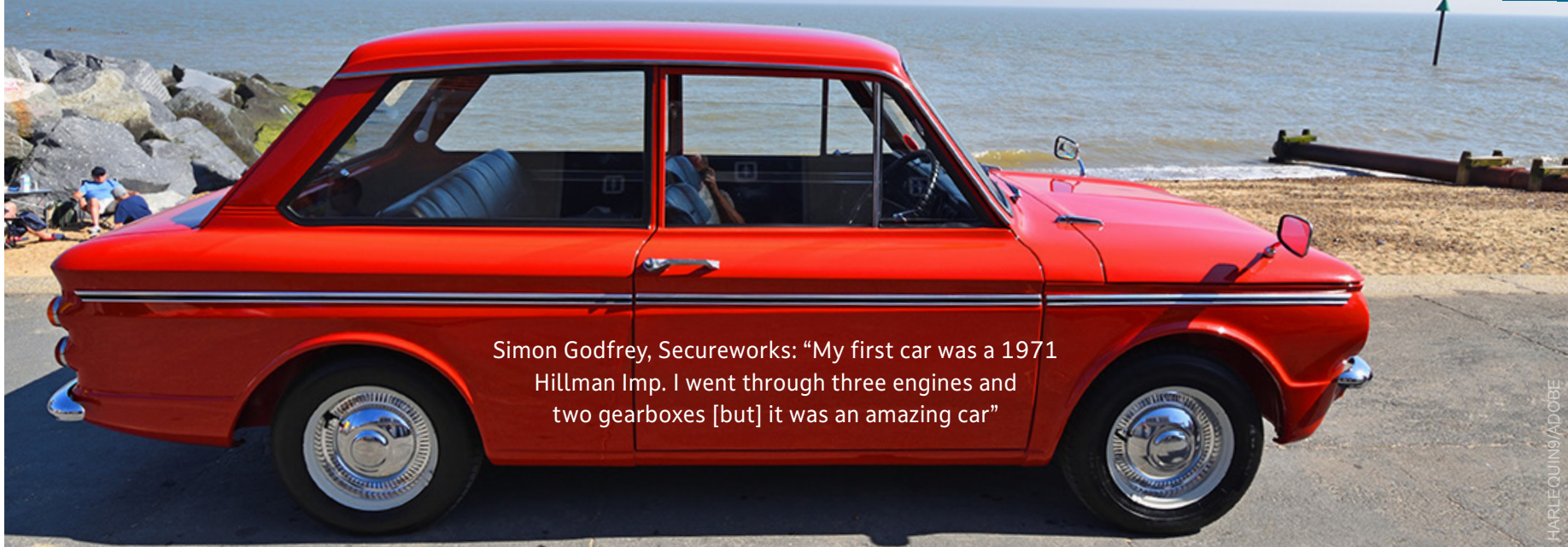
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Simon Godfrey, Secureworks: “My first car was a 1971 Hillman Imp. I went through three engines and two gearboxes [but] it was an amazing car”

the channel in bringing the benefits of new technologies to customers will continue to be critical.

TELL US SOMETHING MOST PEOPLE DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU

I hold a couple of “King of the Mountain” all-time and outright records on Strava for cycling – downhill, not uphill, I might add.

DID YOU LEARN ANYTHING NEW DURING THE PANDEMIC?

I spent a lot of time cycling during the pandemic. It encompasses fitness, space to think and amazing countryside landscapes to visit.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR DESERT ISLAND MP3s?

I love a wide variety of music, so a mixture of calm and heavier sounds would be on the MP3. It would definitely contain: *The World is My Oyster* by Frankie Goes to Hollywood – epic and theatrical, not what you would expect;

Wasting Light by Foo Fighters – what an album; and *Love over Gold* by Dire Straits – timeless.

WHAT TEMPTATION CAN YOU NOT RESIST?

I love food and drink, but I cannot resist a BBQ: peppers, stuffed with chorizo, chilli, blue cheese, fresh herbs, plus a well-seasoned steak – with a drop of Rioja.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST CAR AND HOW DOES IT COMPARE WITH WHAT YOU DRIVE NOW?

My first car was a 1971 Hillman Imp. I went through three engines and two gearboxes before it eventually went off to the scrapyard. It was an amazing car. And it does not compare to what I drive today.

IF YOU COULD BE ANY ANIMAL, WHAT WOULD YOU BE?

An eagle, so I could soar in the sky. ■