

Weston Morris: Welcome to the Digital Workplace Deep Dive. I'm your host, Weston Morris. Hey, you know, for quite some time, I've been wanting to talk to my guest today because he sets the strategy for all the digital workplace services at Unisys. That's right. I'm talking to Joel Raper, the Senior Vice President and General Manager for the Digital Workplace Solutions business unit at Unisys. Joel, welcome to the podcast.

Joel Raper: Thanks Weston. I've listened to many of the podcasts and I'm excited to get my chance to spend some time with you and talk today.

Weston Morris: Well, we got some tough questions here for you. I'm going to start off with a fun one here. I've heard you say something recently, and I'm going to say it's a bit provocative and I'm not quite sure how our listeners will react to it, but I do believe that what you have to say about this will give them something to think about. You've said we're suffering today from the failed promise of IT. Now, what's behind that statement?

Joel Raper: Yeah it is meant to be a little bit provocative, but it's important because it's the truth. And, you know, I think you can go back to the beginning of IT and organizations and it's played out over and over and over again, right. I mean, I think going back to as PCs became prevalent in organizations, you know, we went to this world where we were going to monitor everything and we were going to get alerts for everything and, and, you know, we'll be able to be proactive at the time and predictive at the time. And what happened was we spent lots and lots of money on monitoring tools and things that checked every nuance of whatever we could actually see at the time. And it was overwhelming. And so then still the catastrophic problems were the only things you took care of, and you ignored the noise and those were real problems, but it wasn't as big, or no one was complaining about it.

Joel Raper: And then you kind of moved into, well, you know, with the new modern operating systems and applications in the cloud, you weren't going to have to fix a whole bunch of stuff. It was always going to update itself. The cloud was always updating on a daily basis. You're not going to have to do patches, you're not going to have to do maintenance, you're not going to do those things. And we didn't quite live up to that one either. And then, you know, we were going to move to, a chat technology instead of really people manning the voice calls and the service desk, for example. Or we were going to install DEX tools that self-fixed everything automatically.

Joel Raper:

And so we were going to greatly reduce the cost of maintaining IT equipment for organizations. And the reality is, IT isn't always perfect, right? The chat technology isn't quite as useful as talking to somebody on phone at times, or it doesn't have the ability to understand the things as, as a user perceives IT versus the real problem. You know, I remember back in my early days, trying to teach somebody that wasn't exactly computer savvy on how to turn a computer on or plug it in. And they were looking about, how do you turn the monitor on? And they had no idea about the computer. And especially you look at manufacturing or other organizations that are customers of ours, that's often the user population, right? I think we're probably a little bit better than that. Most people have to have computers at home and their cell phones and things.

Joel Raper:

But, you know, you don't always get the exact problem statement from an end user in that service desk and, and chat, you know, struggles behind that a little bit. I think, you know, the new promise that we have going on is AI's going to solve everything, right? You can ask that question. It's amazing what the results that you get out of it. but in the enterprise space, it won't quite be that way because you have to limit the data. you have to secure the data, you won't have the kind of quantity of data in those scenarios. And so, you know, we, we still have work to do, for living up to our promises and our hope to our users, which are, you know, the employees of many of our customers or any employee that's out there, but the expectations of how computers are just supposed to work when you turn them on.

Weston Morris:

Yeah. I really wanted to start with that question, Joel, about the failed promise of IT because I know that is informing your strategy. And so let's, let's get into some of your strategy. because we look at some of Unisys competitors and many are getting out of the in-person support model or field services. You know, that's where someone comes to your location, your home or your office, whatever, and physically fixes a device, a keyboard, a mouse, a screen, or whatever. Now, I've also heard you saying that instead of abandoning in-person support, you are doubling down and investing more in this space. So Joel, what do you know about this that everyone else seems to be missing?

Joel Raper:

Yeah, I'll answer that in reverse, right? I think one of Unisys' biggest assets that we have is what we call frontline services or field services organization. And that's the people that are manning the tech cafes, that's the people that are doing what we call dispatch service, where they go out and, you know,

replace hard drives or fans or install servers or, or do any of that equipment or maybe work on kiosk machines or point of sales machines or any of those things. that, that will be needed for the foreseeable future. I don't see that going away at all. And that's why we're doubling down on, you know, that's why that is an important part of our aspect. You know, we're in a stage as we get to things like PC as a service, right? It's a very common thing that most organizations are looking at as you move from the CapEx to the OpEx model.

Joel Raper:

And now they just pay 20, \$30 a month and get a PC as a service and it replaces itself and it does things. But how do you get that PC to the user when they start? How do you recover that PC when they leave? How do you go and fix the PC when it's having troubles? It's the last mile, it's the last person. It's that onsite support that's needed. I'll give you one example, that resonates so well with me. We have one of our customers that is very far on the experience, evolution within their organization. And we, man a tech cafe for them. So we, we have a couple people sitting at a beautiful setup where users can just bring their, their device to them.

Joel Raper:

They'll help them solve the problems, you know, go through the challenges. They may re-image the machine. They may fix a hard drive. They may do whatever they're going to do. They're going to solve the problem in person. That organization, you know, talked about an instance where, you know, somebody that had a disability came up with a, with a wheelchair, and one of our folks actually sat down on the floor with them so they could look at them eye to eye or, or at least below them versus up on a top of a big, big chair and, and behind the desk and had that conversation. The impact of that is huge for that, that person. And why I bring that up is, you know, when, when your machine is not working, it's a problem. It's a stressful situation. You might be trying to get a proposal out. You may have a deadline from your boss. You know, you may need to get something done so you can go home and see your family and being able to hand that over to an individual or talk to a live person, about some of those things is impactful on reducing that stress. And I want to make sure that we're taking care of that for our customers.

Weston Morris:

I have to agree with you around the tech cafe, that is such a delightful experience. if, if a company says they're taking that away, you know, it's like you get a lot of screaming employees saying, no way. But I'm not a hundred percent convinced yet, Joel, about the frontline worker, the field services, the in-person support, being able to double down there. I mean, we, we hear

this phrase about, you know, IT has gotten smarter. in the past I would need somebody to replace a hard drive, a screen, you know, there was something physically they fixed. Now it's just a device swap. So, if we're going to double down in in-person support, what are those folks going to be doing?

Joel Raper:

You're absolutely right. We've had a lot of increases in technology. Heck, in some cases you can go to a local store and get a brand-new machine and you log on and then it downloads all of your company specs and security and, and it takes a couple hours. You get that. I think we've made big strides from that. So, you're absolutely right from that component. however, there's a ton of things in many businesses that require, something beyond that. We have instances where we're going and replacing set top boxes on the back of TVs that deliver TV service, that we're replacing, kiosk machines for fast food restaurants that we're servicing all the technology needs.

Joel Raper:

Maybe it's a new, you know, new access point in a building. Maybe it's a Microsoft Surface device sitting on a wall. Those all have needs for physical interaction, for somebody to go out on location and service that, from a dispatch standpoint, You think about some of those big surface machines, they're huge and they're 160 pounds. That's not a direct swap, right? You've got to go do that. You know, a network device, a firewall, that's not a direct swap. And even if it is, you want somebody to bring the new device, swap it out, plug it in, validate it works, because you don't always have the resources on site as an organization itself. And so there's a lot of opportunities out there. And I think one thing that's unique for us as we look to double down on it, you know, we already are a global, you know, we service just about every country with field services organizations, both from a frontline services, like some of the IT work that I was talking to, but also in a break fix, whether it's appliance, some sort of technology that you can't just do a direct swap on.

Joel Raper:

But we service all over. And the more we get on scale, the better we can service to our customers, the quicker we can be. We may not be eight hours, we might be able to do four hours or instead of next day, we can do same day. And so that's why we continue to grow that organization and open those opportunities up.

Weston Morris:

Yeah, I think you've opened my eyes here just a little bit as I just think about, you know, the number of devices I interact with and compare to like 10 years ago or 20 years ago, like it used to be a laptop, right? Maybe a <laugh> a physical phone at some point, but now, laptop, tablets, smartphone, camera, and if I go

into a building, scanners, smart conference rooms, you mentioned the large smart whiteboards and things like that. Yes, the devices are more likely to be swapped, but there's way more of them and they interact, right? And there's a complexity there. So I see your point completely. There's a need for probably a whole different level of in-person support than just that break fix that we've been talking about for years.

Joel Raper:

Well, and, and let me give you another example that every one of us can probably resonate very well with. You know, most of us have a cell phone, and I think the market share would tend to guess that most of us have an Apple cell phone. I know there's a lot of Android users out there, so maybe I'm sure they have the exact same problem. You know, I've had to do this two or three times. I can't hear through my speaker on the iPhone, right? And usually that's because I do woodshop work and some other things, and it's usually dirty from dust and things like that. But what's the answer? There's no such thing as a swap. It's too expensive, right? To send a new iPhone for such a thing like that. But you can go schedule an appointment in a couple days in an Apple store and they'll come in, they'll take it in the back room and 15 minutes.

Joel Raper:

Speaker works great, it's awesome, everything's functioning correctly. Now, think about you and your role Weston, or many of us that would be listening to this: can we do our jobs effectively with such an impairment on one of our critical devices, right? So if you have a person sitting on site that can help and do those things, we just save that employee a ton of time. And just like the failed promise that I was talking about, our customer that's far along on the experience aspect of it. Ultimately, that's the goal of what we're trying to accomplish. It's not, do we want to offer the cheapest service that we could possibly offer to our customers and get the minimal need and take care of the catastrophic problems?

Joel Raper:

We need to turn this around and make a promise back to IT organizations that say, our goal is to actually improve the efficiencies of your employees. And by improving the efficiencies, that can be something as simple as saving them an hour a month that they would've had to sit on a call with somebody as we escalated to the different tiers, an hour a month of waiting where the cell phone example where you had to wait for an appointment or something. You know, as we think about those ideas, delivering that type of value from an employee productivity standpoint back because we're servicing their IT needs more, probably will have the biggest impact that could possibly be done in a business.

Weston Morris:

And kind of going back to that theme of the failed promise of IT, at the very beginning, you mentioned Joel, generative AI, you know, the whole family there, and there's all kinds of promises, all kinds of promises about what generative AI, Copilot, Bard, you know, you name it, what it's going to do for the industry. Are we setting ourselves up for failure again, to have another failed promise of IT? With all this generative AI hype?

Joel Raper:

I think with every hype cycle, it is always an over-promise situation. I mean, think, think about where we are, even with the cloud, when the cloud first came out, it is a no-brainer. go to the cloud. we still are migrating organizations today, and that's been a, you know, six, seven-year journey that people are dealing with in the cloud. And so, you know, there's a lot of gotchas, there's a lot of, fine print and details on some of these things. And I think gen AI has a potential to fundamentally change our world equivalent to what the internet did. I absolutely do believe that. And I think we can all think about many examples of how that would be the case. You know, I like to use the sentence, you might have heard me say it before, Weston, where there's going to be a lot of money spent on AI.

Joel Raper:

There's not always going to be a lot of value in a short term on AI <laugh>. And the reason I say such a thing is, you know, all of us, every business out there is scrambling how can they best utilize these new advancements that came with Gen AI specifically, and large language models and some of the new features have come out. the use cases are still being developed. And so when you're in a case that the technology's there, but the use cases aren't, you're going to be spending a lot of money and not always realize it. I think back to the big wave of automation that we had, you know, six, seven years ago, and that was going to change everything in our industry, right? We were going to be able to get rid of all manual tasks, everything that was computer related. Where are we right now, that didn't quite live up to its promise either.

Joel Raper:

And the reason behind that is sometimes the cost of that automation, the cost of the development and the creation and all of those things was not worth the value that's gained. And so, my perspective that I give is to really focus on AI that drives an ROI, AI that delivers value back to our organizations. A great example on Copilot would be how are we ensuring that companies are getting the value for frankly, very expensive cost on a monthly cost of Copilot, right? Or if, if we gave you Weston a license, I think you have one, but we gave you a license. How are you using Copilot on a weekly basis? And how much benefit is that creating for you? Right? Hopefully it's freeing up some

time for you. Hopefully it's allowing you to be more productive in your life at the company here.

Joel Raper:

How does the company realize that productivity? Are we sure we're measuring that productivity or are we sure we're getting out of it? And if you just got the license, I'm spending \$30 a month on you, are you using it? Because if you're not, we didn't add any value to the IT organization whatsoever. And so we've got to train you better or do some things to help you get to that point. And I think our offerings around that are pretty exciting. I'm very, very bullish on, you know, where that's going for us and what Unisys can help our customers with.

Weston Morris:

Yeah, I think I'm going to have to send this podcast to, Copilot and have it edited and see how that turns out. We'll see <laugh> if that, that replaces me here. So you really dug in nicely to the commercial generative AI products that are out there because there's a lot of marketing hype and, and advertising and talking about how it can be used. And we're experimenting with that. Maybe we can dig in a little bit different about how you're thinking of using it. I mean, you've got a really smart, chief scientist, Alan Shen, maybe we get him on a podcast here sometime, and Stephen Tong, who has been a guest. I know you've got those guys digging into how to use generative AI, embedding it in digital workplace services. I don't know, are you able to talk about that at all? Or is it too soon to open the kimono on it?

Joel Raper:

No, I think I can share something because we're rolling it out very soon. I was trying to give this example because there was a debate going along on what is the difference between generative AI, or specifically large language models and natural language processing, right? And so, I wrote a blog article recently that talked about this (and you can see that on LinkedIn) – the concept was a person can actually type in the words that says, my computer is broke. Okay, so in the past with natural language processing, there's nothing to run off on that, right? You're not going to find anything. But, in my own experience recently, I'll use an example that happened the other day. IT changed the password. that password actually caused Intune to de-install from my machine.

Joel Raper:

And I have a Mac, and so I don't have admin permissions on my Mac. I can't reinstall that very easily. And so, you know, IT scheduled a meeting to get the fix done. I got temporary capability so I can function correctly and I get on a call and IT took about six minutes to fix it.

Joel Raper: That was it. It was pretty straightforward, pretty easy. Now let's put this in what Unisys is doing for our customers and how we're changing the business, with the progress of large language models and then the tie-in to the other data sets, including looking at knowledge base articles in real time based on the chat or the voice that you and I are having. When I have this problem, when I say my computer's broke, it could say, "Do you have a Mac?" Yes. "What's broken? What changed?" It changed my password and instantly it would bring up the knowledge base article. That's six or seven minutes that I might be able to do at that point, right? In natural language processing in a chatbot in the old way, before we had the gen AI and large language model capabilities and context understanding and knowledge base articles and all of that stuff.

Joel Raper: We would've never have gotten to the same spot. And I think it's such a core example, that I get really excited. I was really pumped going through that pain because I just thought the power of those types of problems, being serviced from a chat technology or being serviced from a level one service desk person in minutes, is right at our fingertips. And that is fundamentally changing how we go about business and how our customers are served.

Weston Morris: Well, Joel, to close out here, I think I'd like to go back to that first statement. Your statement about the failed promise of IT. Now, obviously, I can hear from what you're saying, you're not indicating to abandon IT, you're not recommending that, but to really fix IT, to get value out of IT. So, I mean, what are your thoughts on how do we make IT relevant again?

Joel Raper: I love that relevant again, right? But if you think about, and again, another history lesson, I like to look at history. Because I think we're always on a circular cycle that just kind of repeats itself over and over. When you think about where IT is, right? IT, in the old days, used to have all the authority in the world. You wanted to bring in a new ERP system, who'd you go to? IT? You might have had input if you were on the finance team, but they were going to dictate what that was based on the cost of running, implementing the machinery that I was going to need to run on the database structures. They had every say in the world. You moved to the cloud, they lost the say of the cloud, right?

Joel Raper: You move to the cloud from your servers into an Azure or AWS or something. Now they don't even have data centers in most cases, right? And so we lost the data center components. And so what's IT? Well, they get you a network connection or a Wi-Fi

connection when you sit down, they bring you a device, and this doesn't work for everybody, but a large portion of the folks, the apps are sitting in the cloud itself. The IT value to the organization has decreased because the value has pushed out to the cloud or other companies providing that value. Which is fine. There are lots of benefits and lots of reasons that we've done that, and a lot of value to the organization. We've done that, but IT is not as relevant as it was in the early 2000s, or even the late nineties from that standpoint.

Joel Raper:

How I want to add value back to the customer goes back to one of the other statements I talked about, right? If I can continue to do things and track and report and help IT go back to its organizations to say, the things that we've done through Copilot, the things that we've done through the automation that I talked about in our investment in large language models, are now not saving us costs from our service provider, because that's one benefit, but actually saving our users, you know, 15, 20, 30% of their time when they have a problem. Wow. And that user time is way more valuable than ever the cost of a ticket or the cost of the chat technology. That user time is huge. Think about those users. What if it's a pilot?

Joel Raper:

What if it's a manager of a store? What if it's a finance person? What if it's a salesperson working on a deal to close out or something that's going on in negotiation that is really, really important time that we need to measure and say, see what your decisions have done with your partners, like Unisys and others, the things that you've done, you've given that time back to your organization that you can be more productive with that adds real value on whatever wares, you know, you guys are selling and being profitable with.

Weston Morris:

Well, I tell you, Joel, one of the things I love about you is that despite your busy schedule, you are always super accessible. So if our listeners heard anything today that they want to dig into further or maybe even message you to give you a different point of view, are you open to them reaching out to you? And if so, how?

Joel Raper:

Absolutely. I think, I would say email, but I get 400 or 500 emails a day. I have to use copilot to help me with that. <laugh>. I would say probably LinkedIn is the best one because I don't get a lot of junk out of LinkedIn. So you can find me out on LinkedIn, Joel Raper at Unisys. That's probably the best way to reach out and, and personal message me. So that's, that's the easiest way.

Weston Morris:

That's super. Well, thank you so much for joining me today on this podcast, Joel.

Joel Raper:

Great. Thanks for having me, Weston. I enjoyed being here.

Weston Morris:

My guest today was Joel Raper, senior vice president and general manager for the Digital Workplace Solutions business unit here at Unisys. This is Weston Morris. I'm the host of the Digital Workplace Deep Dive podcast. Thanks for listening.