

Maurice Fuller

Hi everyone. I'm Maurice Fuller and thanks for joining us. Today I'm with Jason Lander, Executive Vice President of Product and Innovation Services at Medical Solutions. We'll be talking about staffing technology, including single sign-on, build versus buy decisions, and vendor APIs. Jason, welcome and thanks for joining me today.

Jason Lander

Thanks a lot! Thanks for having me.

MF

Of course. Jason, let's start, if you could, with your current role at Medical Solutions.

JL

Sure. I've been with Medical Solutions for a little over three and a half years now. I currently lead all of our product development teams. That's multiple teams delivering products around our customers.

MF

Alright, excellent. Tell us about your background before you got into the staffing industry. What got you interested in staffing technology?

JL

Mostly coincidence, I think. Before the industry, I was in the Marine Corps for a few years, and then when I got out I went to school, studied political science, and worked in politics for a while. I got a little jaded in that avenue and had a friend who worked at a staffing company, and she introduced me to a local healthcare staffing company. I started working there, and it was a long time ago—we were still faxing clients using phones mostly and hardly any email. It was right around the time where technology was really taking off. The web was really becoming something big and powerful and interesting, and I started getting really interested around that time.

MF

Alright. Then you went on to start ShiftWise in 2001. Tell us about your experience launching that company, which today has been quite successful.

JL

Like I said, it was an interesting time. There were still lots of staffing companies primarily using fax and phone technology, and hardly even any email. It was also the time where web-based software was getting popular, and it was long enough ago that we actually had the conversation as to whether or not it should be web-based technology we delivered or client server-based technology. Fortunately, we chose the right path. But even after we got started with it in the beginning, we really struggled to figure out who we were at the time. No one was really doing what we were trying to do. We kept having the conversation: what are we? Are we a staffing company? Are we a technology company?

What are we doing here? Eventually we ended up choosing technology and became a pure play technology VMS company in the healthcare staffing industry.

It was interesting. It was very disruptive. At the time we didn't know it was, but it changed a lot of the ways that business is done even today. In the beginning, it was a struggle. It was an interesting concept because we were giving the technology to our clients with hospitals for free and then charging the affiliates a percentage of the revenue. And that wasn't a new model; that was what had existed as a model for VMS and other niches of staffing. We were just borrowing that, if you will. But we couldn't get anybody to sign up in the beginning. It was quite the struggle, and we had to figure out what we were doing wrong because this worked in other industries.

We got a couple of hospitals to take a chance on us. What we did actually was go to those hospitals, and we got other staffing companies to sign up that had never serviced those hospitals before, and we started going to different nurses and telling them that they needed to sign up at these new agencies if they wanted to continue working at those hospitals. That upset a lot of people, but it worked. It was enough to get staffing companies to sign up and get some traction. We got a few hospitals that way, but really what changed everything for us were the hospital associations. At the time there were several state hospital associations that were banding together and wanting to deliver a service like this for the entire statewide service. The biggest was the South Carolina Hospital Association because they didn't want to just do it for their state—they wanted to do it for seven different states.

So we started pitching our technology to these different state hospital associations. Meanwhile, we were very close to going out of business, like literally months away, because we were not getting enough traction. Finally we were able to sign contracts with all these state hospital associations and went from having about seven clients to a few hundred in just a matter of months. That really changed everything for us. After that, more and more hospitals started signing up. We still had a lot of the bigger staffing companies holding out and not wanting to participate, but eventually they all came on. We were very successful with that and grew the company to be, like you said, a very successful company in that time until we sold it to AMN.

MF

Wow. Absolutely fascinating the way you had to sort of develop this new technology but also develop an entirely new business model as well along the way.

JL

Yeah, it was interesting. One of the things I thought was interesting about it too was that we were the first in the industry to really put out this idea of being vendor neutral, right? At the time, vendor on-premise or managed services were just getting popular, but one of the things that made us attractive was that we said we're vendor neutral. We're a technology platform. We don't have any dog in this fight, if you will, and you can manage

this yourself. What I think was really interesting about it was watching, after that started getting traction, a lot of these staffing companies trying to position themselves as being vendor neutral. It became so popular that it was kind of the buzzword.

Once that happened, once we essentially had our competitors copying us, I knew that's when we were winning—because they couldn't differentiate themselves. They were trying by trying to copy us, but that was never going to work. In time that term has kind of fallen out of fashion. Now managed services is back in fashion, and it's a very popular service to hospitals. It's been interesting to watch it go back and forth both ways.

MF

You were right at the beginning of a massive transformation of the staffing industry. Let's move on to the next stage of your career: you co-founded Staffing Robot, which built amazingly innovative websites for staffing firms. How did you grow from that experience?

JL

I think the most things we learned from that was just working with so many different companies in so many different industries. At the time, all my experience had been in healthcare staffing. When we first launched the company, we were saying, hey, we will do this work for healthcare staffing companies: websites, branding, application development. But very quickly we realized, wait, this knowledge translates to other niches of staffing. It was a great experience to work in these different niches of staffing. We learned that actually they are very different in a lot of ways from healthcare. Some of them are more innovative. Some are behind. It was fun to have that experience working with those different companies. I think the biggest thing we probably learned that was exciting for us was when we truly as a company started focusing on culture. That's where I really learned the true value of culture and of good culture at a company.

For us, it was very evident that the companies with the best cultures were the most creative, the most innovative, the ones that would work with us and let us do our thing and wouldn't overly dictate what we were trying to do. Lots of companies would come to us saying they wanted something really fun and interesting and unique and creative. But when we'd show them the work we were trying to do, they would go "oh no, no, no, we don't want that." You know, it was funny because it was actually one of the things that attracted me to Medical Solutions in the beginning. Medical Solutions was one of our first large clients at Staffing Robot. I really learned a lot about that idea of culture and a positive culture from Craig Meier, our CEO and the leader of Medical Solutions. He preached that a lot. At first it seems overwhelming, like wow, is it really like that? But once you get inside the walls you realize, yeah, he means it. And it has an incredibly positive and different effect on the entire company.

MF

You mention culture, and I couldn't agree with you more. When you're within a company that has a great culture, it's an amazing experience, and you can make significant

progress. I also want to say that when you were running Staffing Robot, I frequently pointed companies to Staffing Robot as an example of best of breed websites because you guys had the best websites at the time. I want to dive into staffing technology. We've seen an absolute explosion of staffing tech solutions that have come to market over the last five years and you've spoken at conferences in the past regarding build versus buy decisions. What's your view on this today?

JL

I agree—there has been an explosion even from just a few years ago. I was out of the industry for a couple of years, and I felt that when I first came back and started coming to some of these conferences. I was surprised about how much new tech was out there. It's been great to see actually. I think there's a lot of good ideas, and there's a lot of interesting tech. What I'm seeing is a lot of them are actually having trouble getting any traction, I think for various reasons. There's a lot of companies that are not quite able yet to do what they claim they're doing or what they want to do. One of the biggest claims I hear out there is this idea that they're getting rid of recruiters and they're automating things fully, but they're really not. They're just calling the recruiters or their clients people something different. So I think they're struggling with that and because of it I do think that there is a huge build versus buy opportunity that's going on right now, probably more than has ever existed.

In a lot of cases, I think it depends on what you mean by build versus buy. A lot of times what people really mean is licensed or not truly buy, and if it's just licensing, I still think it's tough. What I'm seeing from the perspective of Medical Solutions and being at a large company is that there's not a lot of off the shelf solutions that really work for us because in so many ways they're limited. They don't have the right functionality, or they would radically alter our process and it would be much too costly for us to absorb. Or they're missing the three key ingredients that I've thrown out there in the past, which is: they don't have an API, they don't have single sign-on, or, shockingly, they don't even really work well on mobile devices. I'm still shocked when we talk to third parties and they say something like, well, it works on mobile phones but it wasn't built for mobile phones. I don't know how you can really get away with that today.

So when you see these are the options, in many cases it's still a better option to build the technology that you need out there. Unfortunately, the problem of course is it's expensive to build, right? You need a lot of capital, you need time, and lots of companies don't have that as an option. In those cases, I think you still need to license. In some cases too with a lot of these companies, they do have good tech and they are doing something interesting with their tech, but they're not getting that traction. Because of that, at some point they're going to need capital or they're going to give up altogether. When they do, I think that's a good time to potentially buy some of those companies.

MF

Very interesting. And then of course when you build it yourself, you also have to pay for the expense of maintaining it and improving it along the way.

JL

Absolutely, and it is costly. But then after having this new experience within the walls of Medical Solutions, I can also see the cost of having a bad vendor. If you're giving your nurses or your clients a bad experience because you're using some third party software that's frequently going down or is not working or doesn't integrate, well, there's a much larger cost to that.

MF

That's for sure. So increasingly we're building complex solutions using components and we're seeing the limitations of the vendor's APIs. What's been your experience in this area?

JL

There's some companies out there that are doing that really well. I by default have this idea that everybody has this API and it's well documented and they started there. That's just not the case unfortunately. Like I said, some companies are doing it well, but there's still a lot that are struggling. For a company like our size, it's critical that there is real time data being sent back and forth from the systems we're using. We were talking to a company recently, and they were saying that they were going to update their API so that they could send us data within four hours. Within four hours you might as well send it four months from now and just mail me something.

If I'm a nurse and I'm supposed to do something in your software and I click a button, I need to know that that data was sent and received right away so that I've completed this task. If I'm sitting there and it's not updating itself, I'm going to assume something's wrong. And if I assume something's wrong, then I'm going to call the company, and the company's looking into it. Now you're costing me tons of time and money and frustration with my clients. So if you don't have real time APIs these days, you're gonna struggle to get traction for sure.

MF

Yes, absolutely. We are also dealing with a situation today with single sign-on. I have several clients that need to provide multiple logins for their employees to use their systems, and this is becoming a real problem. What are your thoughts on this?

JL

Yeah, single sign-on is another one where, for any vendors out there that are selling our licensing software to staffing companies or any company, single sign-on is a critical component. I can tell you that with a lot of the applications we were using when I first came to the company, the number one problem our travelers or our clients would have is just logging into the app. You go look at the data and most of it was truly that they just

forgot their password. When you're forcing these people to memorize multiple sets of credentials for multiple sets of disparate systems, they don't even exactly remember which one is for what. You're just creating frustration for people. The more seamless you can make that experience by making it at least feel like it's all collected in one set, and single sign-on can do that, I think it's a much better experience to give your clients.

MF

Yeah, absolutely. It's all about the experience and I think the better the experience, the higher the level of satisfaction. More and more, staffing companies are becoming technology companies so we want to pay attention to that experience and make sure it's a really great one.

JL

Absolutely.

MF

We talked about automation before. This industry always feels like we're close to being highly automated yet when you look under the hood, there's so much work left to be done. Why is it that some industries are highly automated now, like FinTech, and staffing still has a long way to go?

JL

There's lots of reasons but to me I would say the biggest one is that I feel like the industry is still at odds with itself when it comes to technology. What I mean by that is that recently I was at the healthcare staffing summit, and there were all these panels where top leaders from large companies, when asked questions about technology, still sounded very negative about how far technology could go. Meaning that when asked things like "do you think technology is going to do this or what can you do with technology that..." their response was: we're still in a people business. Suggesting that there still needs to be some kind of reigning in or limitation on the technology because if you get too far with it, then you get out of the people business. Honestly, I feel like that's such an archaic mindset.

I don't think these things [people and technology] are at odds with each other, in the sense that to me being in the people business means you *are* embracing technology. You *are* automating things. Our clients, our travelers, our nurses—they're people too, and people are busy. They've got kids, they have to cook dinner, they have to go shopping. They have to do all these things. And so the easier you can make the experience you have with them, the more they're going to enjoy it. If you're giving them a frustrating experience and this isn't working, now I gotta call someone and I need to talk to my recruiter, but she's off today and you're creating this idea that you're giving this white glove service through people, but you're really not. So to me, until people get past that mindset that we're in the people business and that means that we don't embrace technology, I think the industry's still going to struggle.

MF

Yes, that's a great way to think about it. I always like to go back to Amazon. Before Amazon, all these books and things that I buy on Amazon I went to retail stores for and I interacted with people. Today, I buy it through Amazon, and I don't miss any of those retail experiences at all. I have a great experience working with Amazon, and in the last twenty years I've only spoken to a person at Amazon one time.

JL

I think it's interesting you bring that up because I use that as an analogy all the time. If you go out and Google it, you'll find it: Jeff Bezos put out a letter to his shareholders this last year that was really interesting, and effectively what he was saying was that the true value that Amazon brings to its customers is time savings through automation. He essentially broke down and quantified the time savings that Amazon gives to its customers and what the value of that translates to. I thought it was fascinating and I feel like it's exactly what we're talking about here. For lack of a better way to say it, time is money. People are busy. The more friction you put in front of them for doing things the more frustrated they'll become.

MF

I think that's a great way of thinking about it and aligning that with the experience that our employees have. You're one of the most creative and technologically passionate individuals that I've ever met in this industry. How do you maintain your enthusiasm for the work that you do?

JL

Well, thanks for the compliment. I think for a lot of reasons. Number one: not to sound too contrived, but it's really people—the people I work with. When I look back at the last twenty years, I don't actually think about the tech that we've delivered. I think about the people I've worked with, and that's what makes it fun. That's what makes it interesting, it's not just the fun we're having or cracking jokes all the time. It's about being surrounded by other innovative people and learning from them, sharing ideas, and coming up with good things together. That's what's exciting to me because when you're around a good group of creative talented innovative people and you're all thinking about how to tackle a problem or solve a problem, that's what's fun and interesting. To me that just doesn't ever get old. There's a lot of work to do still, as you said. There's a lot this industry needs to get better and to become what it can be. Just looking at what needs to be done and being able to work with great talented people—I think that's what excites me every day.

MF

I think it's about making a difference and really having an impact on people's lives, and you've certainly had a huge impact on tens of thousands of people's lives. I want to thank you very much for joining us today, Jason. This has really been a great discussion.

JL

Thank you, Maurice.

MF

Alright, everyone. Thanks for listening, and I look forward to seeing you on the next Staffing Technology podcast.