

Managed Services and Cloud Provider for Small to Medium Sized Businesses



Liam Holmes - CEO

About MIS Solutions, Inc.

MIS Solutions specializes in helping small- to mid-sized companies with their computer and technology needs. Our approach helps streamline and simplify technology, increase productivity and deliver a competitive edge to customer's needs.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: Mr. Holmes, what is the concept at MIS Solutions?

Mr. Holmes: MIS Solutions is a regional-based managed services and cloud provider. We specialize in serving small to medium size businesses, which is defined as firms that have 10 computers up to about 150 computers. We provide support services in a fixed fee approach for customers who have on premise technology needs as well as those who are looking for cloud-based solutions.

CEOCFO: Do you still do much on premise?

Mr. Holmes: We do. I think, realistically, you either have people who are invested in their own premise solutions, whether that is through staff or applications, or whether that is simply the sheer fact that they have capitalized assets that they have not paid for yet. They will make that change when those assets come time to be replaced. I also think you have customers who are probably going to always be a hybrid, or they may just conceptually be on premise only because that is what they are comfortable with. I think that what you will find is that customers have the freedom to choose whether they totally want to go off premise or if they want to be on premise or somewhere in the middle. I do not think there is a one size fits all kind of approach.

CEOCFO: Within the small to mid business range, are there particular verticals of focus?

Mr. Holmes: Sure there are. What you tend to find is customers who have many compliance needs, but tend to be one of the first kinds of companies that want to outsource their IT. The compliance itself could be fairly burdensome, so that might be people who are in the medical industry who have HIPAA compliance requirements and of course that keeps ratcheting and changing. That makes it very expensive and difficult for them. It might be people who are in the financial services arena that need Sarbanes-Oxley compliance auditing done, or it might be people who are in the insurance or manufacturing sectors. I think there are a number of sectors, but we are seeing quite a significant change particularly in the attitude of how they service their technology, but it really seems to be driven by compliance. People who are really compliance-based organizations are taking a much more simplistic approach and saying the compliance is difficult for us. It is hard for us to comply and it is not really something we consider to be part of our core skill set. It is something they would really rather just outsource to somebody who is knowledgeable in that compliance space. That is obviously a growth segment for us.

CEOCFO: What is the key to being on top of the regulations?

Mr. Holmes: I think what you will find is that compliance is a difficult piece and there is a lot of training that goes into that, even for ourselves. We just went through probably six months ago where we had to take everybody in the organization, whether they were the receptionist or in purchasing and accounts receivable. No matter what it is that they did, all of them had to go through HIPAA and security training. We had to do that top to bottom so that we made sure that everybody understood what protected health information (PHI) was and how to treat that. We have had to do the same with other industry certifications. For example, we have two on staff certified ethical hackers (CEH), which is a European council standard. It is because we own our own cloud that we want to be able to show our customers that in our cloud space, we not only know how to build the cloud and manage it, but that we have the expertise to be able to protect the data as well. I do think that like anything and anybody's industry, as technology is changing quickly and everybody is moving from on premise to cloud and trying to make those decisions as to what makes sense to them, there is a great deal of education on the provider's part around compliance and security.

CEOCFO: *What are ethical hackers?*

Mr. Holmes: An ethical hacker, if you think about it, falls into three categories where we can all easily identify them. A black hat is somebody who hacks into systems for personal gains, or sometimes it is around some sort of cause that they are doing that. A grey hat is somebody who is an ethical person, meaning they work at a company protecting data during the day time, but at night they are black hat and doing things that they should not do. A white hat is somebody who is an ethical hacker, meaning that in order to really be able to protect the data that your customers are entrusting you with, you yourself have to perform intrusion detection and be able to try and hack into your own systems to make sure you yourself are protected. To do that, we had to make sure that we had staff members that were certified in those kinds of penetration testing to make sure that we could keep our customers' data safe, particularly if they are in financial services, or if they are health care and did not want to end up on the front page with patient records being stolen or credit card numbers being stolen. It does create a much higher level of awareness to make sure that you are protecting your customers' data. In the data center, you have many customers in one place, which would of course be a great place for somebody to steal a bunch of stuff. You have to be a little bit more careful about that.

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- Lliam Holmes

CEOCFO: *Do your prospective customers understand the depth of what you do? Do they realize that everyone on your staff should be HIPAA compliant and that it puts you ahead of many of your competitors? On the other hand, do you find people are not as aware of what they should be looking for in their services provider?*

Mr. Holmes: I think that this is a bit of a changing landscape. HIPAA has been around for a number of years and I think particularly in the small provider office, take a chiropractor for example, it may be only two to four doctors. They know that they have not been compliant for a long time and they have not really made much of an effort to get compliant because nobody has really been audited. They have not really spent that time, effort or money to become compliant. In fact, they themselves are not very aware of what they would need to do to become compliant. One of the major changes that happened with HIPAA is when they passed the HITECH Act, part of that was the fact that auditing is now funded by the government, whereas previously there was no funding that was allocated for auditing. Although everybody was supposed to be HIPAA compliant, the reality of it was there was no money in the budget for anybody to do any auditing. Unless you were gross negligent or you were a very large provider, the chances of getting audited were pretty small. With HITECH and the designated funds for HIPAA compliance auditing, that has changed, and I think what is happening now is there are many people that are saying, “Wow, look at all the things we have to do and look at all the logging and the fact that we are supposed to have our own security compliance officer. We are supposed to do all this training and we are supposed to make sure our data is encrypted and all these other things.” I think what happens is that the doctors look at each other and they say we ourselves do not necessarily understand all the statutes. We certainly do not understand all the technology that is now required in order to become compliant, and quite frankly it takes us away from what it is that our core business is. We really need to find a partner who can specialize in doing that and really just clean our plates of that so we can get on to seeing and serving patients. I think that this awareness of the requirements is driving many doctors and other business owners to want to outsource the compliance requirements they now face.

CEOCFO: *What is the competitive landscape? Atlanta is definitely an up and coming area.*

Mr. Holmes: Atlanta is very competitive. I am part of a national organization where we mentor five or six hundred other MSPs across the country. When we look at the other providers and look at their service plans, pricing, skill sets, compliance and the speed of their market, they are actually quite far behind. Atlanta is a tech town and there are many companies in Atlanta that are dealing with technology on a day-to-day basis. What we tend to find is that Atlanta is very competitive because of that and it is competitive in many different ways. It is competitive in terms of what kind of service plans, what our offerings are and how technology rich they are to our customers. It is competitive in terms of being able to find a qualified people to hire. That is a very difficult task here in Atlanta. It is difficult in terms of making sure that you have the right vendors with the right solutions that can help you bring those technologies to market at a competitive price. Atlanta has quite a number of things that make it competitive, but it is not just the fact that there are many other tech companies in Atlanta.

CEOCFO: *How do you handle all those challenges you just mentioned along with the ones we talked about earlier? You have a great deal of experience, but how does it translate into the day to day for you?*

Mr. Holmes: We have been around a long time. I started the business out of my home in 1995 and we grew organically for quite a number of years. It seems to me that as the years have gone by you learn these lessons that other mature businesses have learned along the way. One of the big breakthroughs for us has really been the fact that at MIS, we have

three distinct audiences. All three of them are vitally vibrant to our business and we cannot ignore any of the three. It is our vendors. We must have very strong relationships with our vendors and we have to treat them as well as our valued customers. The IT space is full of moving pieces so to offer the world-class service our customers expect, relationships and strategic alliances are vital to our success as a service organization. Of course, our employees are just as important. They are really the assets of our business. Our employees are the face and voice of MIS. They are the people that deliver our product and they are the people who are working with our customers, solving their problems and being very creative about making sure they have the right solutions for the right people. They have to do that in a way that is not only technical and efficient, but they have to now do that in a way that is very customer service-oriented and focused. That is important. The third audience is our customers themselves. In the early years of MIS, we tended to focus more on our customers' needs and less on our vendors. However as the technology world has evolved into one of collaboration, integration and customization, we've realized the importance of all 3 stakeholders – customer, vendors, and our employees. I think it really took us probably the better part of 10 or 15 years to realize that it really takes all three of those audiences to be able to be successful. It is not any one of them because without any of them you really do not have a very good business.

CEOCFO: *What is next for MIS?*

Mr. Holmes: I think probably a couple things will be different a year from now. We have put a tremendous amount of effort into our cloud infrastructure and offerings, and we continue to develop that as a core technology and a core differentiator for us. I think that will probably be different if we were to talk a year from now. I also think that when we look across the landscape, there are many of smaller providers – people who are one, two and even three-person shops that are going to have a really difficult time with cloud transition because implementing a secure, reliable cloud platform takes a much deeper skill set than what many of the smaller providers have. I know that when we look at some of the smaller IT firms across the country, we see many people who are struggling with that exact question. I think if you were to talk to me a year from now, probably one of the things that will change is that we will have a franchise model where we have other offices that are using our infrastructure and some of the best practices that we have developed to help the smaller IT shops stay relevant in their market spaces.

CEOCFO: *Do you see acquisitions as something for the future as well or do you prefer the model you just mentioned?*

Mr. Holmes: I think it could potentially be a little of each. I like the franchise model simply because I think it allows a smaller practitioner to remain relevant in his or her marketplace, whereas without that there would be a significant consolidation in the marketplace. I kind of like that, whereas with the acquisition route what you are really looking at is combining assets with a company or someone who is going out of business because they can no longer remain relevant. Maybe this is just a cultural thing for me, but I tend to rather like to help and empower people succeed rather than making sure that they simply do not go bankrupt.

CEOCFO: *Would you tell us a little bit about your family and your off time?* **Mr. Holmes:** There are many lessons that you learn as you have a business, and particularly if you have had any success, I think one of the things that you learn over time is the value of family and the value of your community. One of the things that we discovered somewhere along the way was that children are a true passion area for us and the team here at MIS. We have spent a ton of time and effort particularly over the last couple of years investing in our company and getting involved with children's food and coat drives. As you look at your own kids, to be able to instill those kinds of values to your own kids can be very challenging at times. I have an eight year old girl and a 10 year old boy, so we have one of each, and to be able to bring those kids into a world where you can have some sort of service leadership is really an important core value for us.

CEOCFO: *Put it all together for our readers. There are many companies to look at in your industry. Why does MIS Solutions stand out?*

Mr. Holmes: I think that our unique selling point in our market space is the fact that we are very forward thinking in what we do. We help business owners understand the technology choices and options to serve their business need or meet the challenges they face as their business grows and expands. I will also say that it is really about the fact that we are a very relationship-driven company always seeking to serve and lead in the areas of technology, business process improvement and innovation. We take time to get to know our customers and their businesses. This effort enables us to serve well. The better you know and understand your customers, the more value you bring to the table. We've found that if we deliver great value coupled with world class service – everyone wins and that is one reason we have such a high retention rate among clients.

BIO: The Rhodesia-born “head guy” at MIS Solutions says he holds more certifications than anyone wants to read about. With over 25 years’ experience in the IT industry, he’s worked as a field tech, systems engineer, project manager, software developer, business consultant and CEO. Before MIS, Lliam served as consultant for FORTUNE 500s and many other companies, including Nokia Cellular, NAPA Auto Parts, Eli Lilly, HGTV, Crozer-Keystone Hospitals, Bethco Inc., Optima Technologies and BravePoint. In 1995, he started MIS and grew it to serve Gwinnett County and the Atlanta, Georgia area. As CEO, he focuses on strategic direction, research, development, MIS operations and strategic business consulting for their clients. He enjoys delivering innovative and creative solutions that tackle business owners’ challenges. Lliam also works with a national operations group that serves managed services providers and a best practices network monitoring and remediation group that creates network monitoring and issue remediation strategies. This busy guy is active in his community and passionate about serving his church’s youth ministry. You also can find Lliam spending as much quality time as possible with wife Jennifer, their two children Will and Katie, their Chihuahua named Nacho and extended family — as well as watching movies and travelling internationally.



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