

IT Services for Small and Medium Businesses



Keith Schoolcraft
CEO

aCOUPLEofGURUS is your Personal Technology Department. We build, monitor and maintain networks, and we manage their security so you don't have to—24 hours a day, seven days a week. During our 12 years in business, aCOUPLEofGURUS has become a leader in the local I.T. industry and contributes to shaping the future of technology on a national level.

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

CEOCFO: Mr. Schoolcraft, what was the concept when you started aCOUPLEofGURUS and where are you today?

Mr. Schoolcraft: When we started the company, I wanted to rethink how IT was being delivered and managed for small business. I had many ideas and I wanted a venue to exercise those ideas. I have been able to create programs targeted towards small and medium businesses that meet their needs as they grow. It has been fun. We always had the intention of growing. We have been doing that slowly but surely.

CEOCFO: What types of services do you provide?

Mr. Schoolcraft: We started off with the old way of doing things. We used to wait for our customers to contact us and wait for problems to occur. We have changed now to being proactive. Through our managed service program, we do a great deal of proactive work on our customers' systems. It has changed who I have hired, how we deliver service, processes you have to put in place, software that we had to purchase and just really changed everything. We started to have more proactive conversations with customers. We find that it is a challenge for most small businesses to manage and budget for IT. So we bring them a compliance report on about a quarterly basis and we start planning their infrastructure four or five quarters ahead of time. It's a paradigm shift for many small business executives; they have been mostly reactive and we are trying to change their mental habits. If they are doing strategic planning, we help them incorporate a technology plan as well.

CEOCFO: Do you find that many of your customers are receptive?

Mr. Schoolcraft: They are highly receptive once they realize what we are doing with them. When we first start with a customer, we are driving many conversations and meeting frequently. As time goes on, usually the tables will start to turn, and they will start to reach out to us and bring us into the conversation ahead of time; that is a fantastic place to be. They will start to see the more advanced planning that they do the less reactive their organization becomes.

To use a basic example, in the old days, you would get a call from someone who just changed their internet service provider. They ask to have us set up the new connection for them. They call us the day that the technician from the phone company is out there installing the new circuit. Chaos often would ensue as they and we scrambled to do everything last minute. These days, we're having that conversation in advance and planning the change and the switch. We know if and when they can afford down time and we make sure to have our technician scheduled at the right time. It is much less chaotic to have everything planned out.

CEOCFO: Would you tell us about the manufacturing services you offer?

Mr. Schoolcraft: We are seeing that people are now thinking about the shop floor much more. One of the solutions that we are looking at implementing within our client base is bringing mobile tablets to the shop floor

so that work instructions are more real-time. When you have a worker standing in a machine or machining a new part, the latest process can be more readily available in front of them. In our geography, we have a great deal of medical device manufacturers, who have to work with 21 CFR/Part 11 compliance issues. Then you have manufacturers that are covered by ITAR (International Traffic in Arms Regulations), which is a defense-level compliance and there are different things that one has to adhere to. Our solution designs have to be tailored to the client, and in compliance with the applicable regulations.

I think what I have seen is that manufacturing in America is alive and strong. They are using technology to help maintain their competitive edge. They are now starting to take those lean initiatives to the back office.

CEO CFO: *How do you reach your prospective customers?*

Mr. Schoolcraft: That is a great question. We have always been a small company and it has been important that our reputation stays strong. I have always believed that if you create wildly happy clients those clients will pass the work to you. We have done fairly well through referrals. We are seeing there has been a transition to social media as a venue for “word of mouth.” We have had Chamber membership and things like that.

“I think about how we can steer our clients in the right direction so they are staying competitive but not experimenting... If you value technology and relationships, we’d love to partner with you.” - Keith Schoolcraft

CEO CFO: *A Couple of Gurus has been recognized as one of the 100 best places to work in Minnesota. What makes it a great place?*

Mr. Schoolcraft: We are fun and that is one of our values. Being a small business one of the things that I always wanted to do is provide a great place to work. It is something that I am continually working on. One of the things I have done is gone around and met with other business owners who won different awards that are in similar categories and said, “what are you doing to create a culture that is just on fire and forward thinking, because that is the kind of company I want to create.” We enhanced our benefit package. We carry maybe a heavier benefits package for a company our size than most. That is important because I value our employees and I want to take care of them. We do some fun things like Steak Fest in the summertime where I will grill for everybody and families are invited. Even small things, like there is always food around here for them to eat in case they miss a lunch or a breakfast. Usually it is large companies offering things like that, so we wanted to be small and fun.

I look for a culture fit and I look for a foundation in people I hire. Technology is changing all the time, so I have to look at the basic core skill set that someone has. I ask if this is something I can build on and grow. I look for a solid knowledge foundation and then I look for people who can be articulate and have a customer service orientation. I seek people that have a natural tendency toward wanting to help other people. When I hire engineers with that core desire, they will go to the ends of the earth for our customers and be forward-thinking with our client base.

CEO CFO: *What surprised you as the company has grown and developed?*

Mr. Schoolcraft: One is the emotional rollercoaster as the owner; the good times and the bad times, such as 2008-2009 the “great recession.” The first time I had to do a layoff that was not performance-related, but more market driven, that was really tough. You do not realize the degree that you love your people. So that was probably the biggest surprise. Some of the ideas and innovation that people have brought forth are very fun to see. I have culturally encouraged people to bring their ideas to the table and flesh them out. I have always like the 3M ideal of spending twenty percent of your time innovating. When you can provide some of that time for your people you get to see exciting things.

CEO CFO: *How do you know what to pay attention to with all the new technologies?*

Mr. Schoolcraft: That is a good question. Technology is changing fast and when I look at technology and what might stay and what might be a fad, I look for what is solid. There is certain technology whose foundation is solid and it is not going away. Despite what the stock market does or doesn’t do to a stock, there are certain technologies that just solve real business problems. Those technologies are not going to go away.

Technologies that meet a real need will change and mature but they are not going to completely go away until you have something that is better in the marketplace. The whole cloud world right now is a little bit like the Wild West and the dust has not entirely settled out there. Everyone's asking, "What is the best architectural design for cloud?" and so forth. That is where we try to help our customers. One of the things that I try to spend a great amount of time on is focusing where the industry is heading. I think about how we can steer our clients in the right direction so they are staying competitive but not experimenting. This is a fun time to be in the technology business, and I am excited for the next 24 to 36 months to see where our company is going to be heading.

CEO CFO: *How is business?*

Mr. Schoolcraft: Business is good. We have a great deal of energy right now.

CEO CFO: *Why pay attention to a Couple of Gurus?*

Mr. Schoolcraft: Where we fit best is with people who want to solve real-world business problems and see how the technology can help with that. Many times as I talk to people, they do not even realize that the technology that they already own can solve their problem. Part of the problem is that they do not know how to ask the question. If you value technology and relationships, we'd love to partner with you. Even if you have unique needs like ITAR compliance, we'd be glad to put technology to work for you. We have long-term relationships with our customers because business does not happen overnight. It takes time to take a business initiative and a strategy and execute on it. The same thing is true for technology strategy and execution. We want to help small businesses take their vision and their business and align the technology strategy to it.

CEO CFO: *Final thoughts?*

Mr. Schoolcraft: I am looking forward to a great 2014 and to hearing from people. I love to talk technology so this is an open invitation for people out there.

BIO: As owner and Chief Executive Guru of aCOUPLEofGURUS, Keith Schoolcraft is responsible for the overall operations of the company and overseeing all of the work performed by the Gurus. Keith has over 15 years' experience consulting and designing networks for small to mid-sized companies, many in the manufacturing industry. His ongoing involvement with the international peer group HTG has given him extensive knowledge of the I.T. industry and its best practices. Keith is a visionary with practical sensibilities, making him a natural at his work in a CIO consulting capacity.



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