Beyond the Network: From the Back Office to Center Stage

When people call on someone from their company's IT organization, odds are it's for a technical issue – to get a broken device fixed, perhaps, or to learn when new technology is to be rolled out. Few come knocking for business acumen or to hear management tips and career advice.

And yet, those elements are at the core of a conference program that has sold out every year since it began in 2010. ITM – or the IT Management Program – is run by Cisco IT. It features IT presenters and is offered at the company's namesake Cisco Live customer and partner conference, which is held three times a year in different locations around the globe. ITM began modestly – occupying a small room with a couple of tables – but now takes place as a major component of Cisco Live, spanning multiple days. The last ITM drew nearly 2,000 attendees.

How exactly has IT gone from the back office to the center stage? Arthur Woo spoke with Cisco IT's Bram Van Spaendonk and Sara Sousa, who oversee ITM, to talk about why the program is in such high demand, its challenges, and what they envision as the program enters its tenth year. Listen as they go beyond the network.

Bram Van Spaendonk: "So the IT Management program started nine years ago. This year we're going to go in our tenth year and celebrate our tenth-year anniversary and I'm proud to say nine years of being sold out. It started really as a separate breakout track, just as attendees can select technical breakouts, they could select the session that was more centered around management of IT. So, talking beyond technology, but talk about leadership, about culture, about maybe some of the softer aspects.

As that was a separate breakout that people could attend it quickly became its own program, because people that attended that particular breakout would see each other and would recognize each other. And that's when we decided -we meaning the marketing team- that puts out the event as well as IT, to make it a separate program, which started with less than a hundred people in a ballroom somewhere in a corner and a couple of tables and quickly grew from a hundred to two hundred to four hundred, seven hundred, nine hundred, eleven hundred, fifteen hundred, eighteen hundred, and last year, well over eighteen hundred, close to two thousand people who attended our IT Management program, learning from not only Cisco but more importantly from each other. They're all technology leaders, all figuring out how to deal with uncertainty in technology. But also, on what skill sets we need to develop. How we plan or budget, how we protect ourselves because, as you mentioned earlier, IT is no longer in the back room but now it's center stage. It's counted on to drive a lot of these new business models that exist."

Arthur Woo: "So when you talk about um wow a hundred people, what was it like then?"

Bram: "The first IT management was in a small room where we had one projector projecting on a screen and a couple of tables. Where we were trying to encourage people to talk to each other.

We've had a lot of presenters come from the BU talking about the latest products and the latest features and gadgets that we were launching, but we quickly realized and learned that the value came more from the peer to peer interaction, the networking between people that had similar challenges and similar problems and that's when we decided that the speakers that were in IT themselves scored the highest. Because when Cisco IT speaks with customers that are in IT, it's a peer to peer conversation versus somebody from the business unit or somebody from the sales or marketing organization, giving a presentation and having a vendor conversation. When we broke it down to peer to peer when we lowered our guard where we have the customers look behind the scenes of our own company. They would allow us to look behind the scenes of their company and that's where the magic happened. You asked earlier about the, what's the, the secret sauce or the magic and that's really by IT for IT.

The people who put this program together Sarah Sousa, she is our Program Manager, she's in IT. The presenters that we put on stage they are in IT. They live and breathe and feel the pain that our customers experience every day. And that's why the program grew so much and that's why it's successful and that's why I'm proud to say that we were sold out for nine years in a row. And I can't wait to celebrate our tenth-year next year, when we kick it off in Las Vegas."

Arthur: "You mentioned that every year was growing. A hundred then two hundred, four hundred. That's pretty staggering growth every year. So, as you were kinda going on that trajectory, how did you get the word out so to speak?"

Bram: "Yeah, I'm really one of the big compliments that we get is when people come back, because it tells us that they see the value and they appreciate coming and they want to come back. So, we currently have over a third of the people that attend are repeat attendees. A lot of times they're the ones that are our biggest advocates. They tell their peers they tell their colleagues that this is something worth going to.

The other part I would say is that in IT in general, there is a big shift towards-towards the business. At our EBCs which is our Executive Briefing Center, that is in San Jose. We often don't have technologists show up to learn about technology, we now have over half of the people that come to the EBCs are people that are in the Business of IT. That are now being asked, how do we drive new business models and the examples are plenty whether it's an Uber or an Amazon or a Lyft or Air BnB. They're no longer retail or taxi companies or hospitality companies they are technology companies. So, technology plays at the heart of every business transformation.

And that's what people want to learn about and that's why they come to the IT management program at Cisco Live. To learn about the impact on the business not just because of technology, but because of the business outcomes. And when we talk about that, that's when we see the light bulbs go off, that's when we see people taking pictures of the slides, that's when we see people asking questions because everybody that's in that room is asked to be a person at the table, have a seat at the table, versus in the past, being an order taker or somebody in IT in the back room and now we're putting them on stage and hear about how they drive business transformations.

So, it's those types of examples that makes this IT Management program, so successful."

Arthur: "As you're going through this over the years were you surprised like oh my gosh, we went from one hundred to two hundred and then oh, were you ever surprised and said, oh, my gosh the numbers tripled, now what do we do?"

Bram: "This is all Sarah."

Sarah Sousa: "I would love to jump in here because with each event with each region, it is definitely an experiment and a learning process, and we take the best of what we learn from one event and apply it

to another. We are constantly pushing the bar, we are constantly we have a third repeat attendee, so we want to ensure that when they come back, they're getting a new experience, they're taking away something different, something exciting, something that motivates and inspires them. So, we don't want to just put out rinse and repeat the same show. We absolutely make sure that we are constantly trying new things."

Arthur: "Earlier Bram you mentioned it's in different regions. So, um, I would imagine you have to have different requirements or different things that you have to focus on each of those. Give us a little view of what does that world look like in each of these locations and as this thing grows over-over time every year again, it's like one, two hundred, three hundred, four hundred, five hundred. How do you adjust for that?"

Bram: "I'll start off saying that it's a great problem to have and we actually we cap it every year purposely even though we could sell more tickets, we make sure that we have a limit on it because we designed a program and even though it would be good for our ego to get more people, but this is an event for our customers and if we are going to oversell or not have enough, we try to keep it actually as small as possible. That's why last year we introduced workshops instead of only main stage presentations that I'm sure you've been to where you sit in a chair at a conference listening to somebody on stage and look at the PowerPoint, where we make it much more interactive because one of the challenges of this problem we are having that we're growing so much, is how to keep it intimate and interactive."

Sarah: "So, these workshops are designed to allow attendees that customization where they can pick a topic that they really want to double down on. These are larger blocks of time, two hours that really allows them to get fully immersed in a new topic, a new skill set, a new thought process et cetera, tried to make them very engaging and interactive. So, the individuals are set in small tables. They're encouraged to do small group work and problems and troubleshooting, and in that process, they're also talking to each other. Let's face it, it's a little bit hard to just go up and cold call on someone and strike up a conversation. So, by putting them around a project, they're able to start making those connections. And they're sharing best practices. They're sharing problems in their journeys that they faced and how they overcame them. And then again, at the end of the day hopefully they're making that new network connection that they're taking home and leveraging throughout the year.

So, in addition talking about our three different locations again we have very different groups, very different cultural elements, very different requirements and stages of where the program is at. So again, in the US, we're kicking off our tenth year and that's the program that Bram referenced that has grown from one hundred all the way up to eighteen hundred, two thousand this upcoming year.

Then we move over to the European region, which has some unique challenges. You've got over fifty-two plus countries coming together with very diverse languages, backgrounds, industries and verticals, et cetera. So, we really try to focus on ways to allow them an opportunity for example, at lunch we set up lunch topics based off language because your brain gets tired listening to all these presentations in English when that's not your native language. So not only does this given them a chance to recharge but also again, driving that networking, making that connection, that personal connection.

And then we move over to the Asia PAC region Asia, Australia, et cetera and that is our youngest program that's our newest program it's about I believe we're on our fourth year, fifth year for that program, that one smaller around five hundred individuals. There we're continuing to pick up speed and momentum and establish the recurring group that attends. So that one's fun because that was definitely more so in the newer phases and the growth phase. So, we really get to explore and play with different things that we don't get to play with in in the larger regions."

Arthur: "What is an agenda, or a week like at Cisco Live? Like how does it work? Is it a day, is it two days? Is it a full day, half day? All presentations? Break it down for us."

Sarah: "So, Cisco Live is typically a week. It's typically Monday through Friday because again, Cisco Live has a wide variety of programs all running parallel at the same time. ITM ranges anywhere from a four-day program to a two-day program, depending on the region. We provide a fully curated agenda for our attendees, jam packed again we like Cisco Live you know 9-5 provide them full content. And the sessions really range. You go anywhere from a keynote presentation. We partner with Cisco Live, make sure our attendees all join up with the rest of the event for all the main stage keynote presentations that Cisco Live offers.

From there, they come back and we provide again our own main stage content. We have then a variety of session formats. So, we have customer spotlights, which are usually a panel or a fireside chat with a customer where they're talking about how technology has advanced their business and the challenges they faced and where technologies help support them and drive that business. We can have an external guest speaker which we provide every day. We like to provide that thought leadership. We like to make sure that we are inspiring them and motivating them again, getting them to think differently. What's something going on in technology? What's something trending that we haven't thought of and we haven't looked ahead at and that's going to impact me as a leader.

We of course have Cisco guests. Of course, Jacqui our CIO comes, and she hosts an opening keynote to let folks know what's going on with inside Cisco IT? Where are we going? Where is the organization going? And how is Cisco driving changes within the organization? We have guest speakers from other business units that come in and let us know what's trending and what's on the horizon as well as workshops or breakout sessions that allow attendees that opportunity to focus on an area that's specifically interesting to them.

So, it's jam-packed, it's a whole lot of activity, a lot of fun."

Arthur: "So, what I'm hearing is it's not just technical presentations. It's not just business discussions, but it's that and a lot more with all these other activities. There's no shortage of things to do and learn there and people to connect with is what I'm hearing."

Bram: "That's what keeps it interesting is that we put a mix of content up onstage, whether it's an executive or a practitioner. Whether it's an external speaker or an internal speaker. Whether it's somebody who does the work on a daily basis, or somebody who manages a person who does that work on a daily basis. We have it in round tables, we have it in panels, we have it as presentations, we have it as workshops, main stage. So, we try to mix it up for the audience to stay engaged. We also talked about different locations. We tried to have local speakers, local talent, in the local language.

So Europe, we're asking the talent in IT in Europe to speak and talk about the things that they see in their regions and the things that are relevant for the audience in that particular region because in the past, we were criticized that we have the Cisco bus out of San Jose flying to these different locations and speak about that. And what we learned quickly is that customers want to connect with people that they associate with whether it's on the same language, the same region, the same problems, the same accents. That's where we can hit that magic sauce we talked about earlier, because it's by IT for IT with local people in the region, the local talent, encouraging their customers and talk to them about some of the challenges that they face."

Sarah: "And something we've haven't mentioned yet are our three pillars. So, the IT Management program focuses on three core pillars, technology, culture and leadership.

So like Bram said, in addition to providing technical information we want to make sure we're focusing on the softer side, the softer skills of leadership. The importance of culture and how that drives your organization and your team. Again, we provide that variety. A lot of our folks are engineers and architects that have risen up through the ranks and now they're managing teams and budgets and priorities. But we need to still give them enough information on what's going on, on the technical side to keep them dangerous just so that they know what their teams are doing, what projects they're working on and they can relate obviously with their teams to continue to drive their groups forward."

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Arthur: "So, share with us any interesting customer stories or feedback that you might have received."

Bram: So, Arthur we, we pay a lot of attention and the way that we orchestrate the agenda and the content. Sarah talked about that earlier the way that we mix it up between executives and practitioners, external internal and the type of topics. For example, security used to be a topic we would have on the end of the day on the last day. Oh, let's talk about security. Now that's the second most requested topic and it comes right after the CIO overview because it became so important. So, we spend a lot of time and crafting and looking at the feedback mechanisms and looking at all the things that people want to hear more about. But guess what we have as the first feedback and the most feedback we always get?"

Arthur: "Uh coffee?"

Bram: "Coffee and the temperature in the room."

Arthur: "Oh, okay. Lucky guess there wow ok!"

Bram: "So, it's usually the food and the temperature in a room and when Sarah and I get that feedback we know we did something right. Not because they're complaining about the coffee or the temperature in the room. But that because if that's their biggest feedback, then clearly, they are not giving us the content feedback. Or they're not giving us that hey this program wasn't worth attending. If they complained about the food or the temperature, we will take that gladly.

Now of course we do improve it every year and we really do take that feedback seriously to make improvements over the year. But it's interesting that that's the feedback we get most of the time."

Sarah: "I love the story Bram that one of our customer advisory board members told us where he was hiring somebody in negotiation process to hire someone. And this gentleman got another offer and he told our friend, he said I'm going to take this other offer and he came back and he said what if I send you to the IT Management program at Cisco Live every year and he said done. And he took the job because he already recognized and realizes the value that being at Cisco Live being at ITM and for that employer to show that investment in his career development in his growth to continue to move him forward throughout his career cycle, I think that just gives me goosebumps."

Bram: "We have Peter who shared with us that because of the content he learned and the things that he took away from the IT Management program he was named deputy CIO. And he credits the program for having the skills to, to take that on. And that's another example that tells us we're doing something, right.

The other interesting part every Cisco Live at IT Management we ask in one of the sessions. What's the biggest challenge that you currently face that stands in the way of you driving a digital transformation? And whether this event happens at Berlin or Milan or Barcelona or in Europe. Whether the event happens in Orlando or San Diego or Las Vegas. Whether it happens in Melbourne or Cancun. Interestingly enough the words that started to grow in this word cloud, are culture, people and lately security. But those are the biggest barrier. They are not about hey I can't connect people. I don't I don't know how the technology works; I don't have enough money. I don't, its people and culture. And the more leaders realize that it is the people at the end of the day that do the work, the more they get benefit out of coming to our IT Management program."

Arthur: "So, it sounds like technical challenges are still challenges. But you know what, they can be solved, we can work around them. But if you don't have the right people and they're not engaged and they are not working together, then it doesn't matter because you're never going solve it. It's not even about the technical it's the people that are the most important."

Bram: "It sounds funny to hear this from a technical and IT guy the technology is often the easy part."

Arthur: "Thank you for sharing this part about what customers think about the program. But I want to also shed some a little bit of a spotlight, on how about internal IT staff? Because we're putting them up on stage, right? So how did they feel about it?

I'm imagining maybe in the early days you're asking for volunteers and maybe they're like, why are you asking me? I don't want to do this; I don't want to be talking to customers much less don't put me out on the stage in front of like hundreds of people! Because this won't work, none of this great stuff can happen unless you have the IT SMEs or the experts to support it."

Sarah: "Yeah absolutely and we all recognize that Cisco that it's definitely a privilege to be able to go to Cisco Live support it in one way or another. Whether you're presenting, whether you're there helping run the IT Management program, it's very exciting. We're all guilty of it. We all get stuck heads down in our day job and we don't look up and we forget how exciting it is to be at Cisco and to be a part of this great program. So, going there is so motivating, so rewarding you come back so energized. So, people are constantly knocking on our door. People are constantly raising their hand. Hey, you need anyone to help!? I'll help run the mics! I'll do whatever it takes. I just want to go there!

Because it has that much charisma and magic and power you come home, just come home excited and proud to be a part of Cisco."

Sarah: "On top of that yeah, you're right. You get some of these speakers that maybe are a little scared at first, they are a little nervous. You're going to put me on a stage in front of two thousand people? What do you want me to talk about? But what we really emphasize at IT Management is that we want you to tell the real story. This is not a sales pitch. This is not a polished you know uber marketing presentation. Let's talk shop. Let's talk about the challenges you faced. Let's talk about the journey you took. And where did you hit that wall and had to turn right? What did you learn by turning right? What was the AHA moment? What was the blessing in disguise by going through this journey? It was painful, let's talk about that! I mean we recognize that our customers are not full Cisco shops so how do you implement this technology that's layered on top of all sorts of other technologies and vendors and products. How do we work through that? Because that by us talking about that, someone in the audience says I am living that right now. I am experiencing that and now I can go home and try some things because I learned from your mistakes.

So, we make it easy for our presenters because we say just tell your story just tell what you experienced day to day and that's when you get vulnerable, when you open up that Kimono, that's when people lean in. And that's when you get good scores and that's when people want to talk to you after the sessions. So, we try to make it easy."

Arthur: "Be yourself."

Sarah: "Yeah be unique, genuine, authentic, be yourself and let's just, let's just talk about what you experienced because we're all dealing with it."

Bram: "Yes, this is a peer to peer network program. So, the most value people get is not to hear from one person, but to hear from the eighteen hundred others who face similar challenges.

So, we use technology like Poll EV where people can use their mobile phone to interact. We of course use Cisco Teams our internal collaboration space and chat room in order for us to share the presentations and have people ask questions, but also have a dialogue between each other. How are you addressing this? What are you doing in this situation? How would you approach this particular problem? That's the networking where we see where we see the most value.

As far as the speakers. I think quickly on, people realize that this is a development opportunity to be able to speak on a stage in front of hundreds of their peers. Initially it is very scary, and people want to be very polished and very nice and a great presenter. And when we tell them do not worry about it, you're an IT professional this is not your day job, you're not a professional presenter. It's okay if you

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fumble or stumble because I can guarantee you, we pick anybody from the audience and put them on stage they are going to fumble and stumble. In fact we tell the speakers the more vulnerable that you allow yourself to be and the more you tell a story about how we messed up here, but this is what we learned, and this is how we approached it and this is how we got back to help, those are the stories people score the highest.

When you asked about feedback. We look at the feedback and there's a direct correlation between the more honest more direct more vulnerable the more we share what has worked but also what has not worked, those are the sessions that people score the highest and appreciate the most. And that's where we tell our speakers don't worry about being super polished and super smooth and very nice presentation tell your story. Tell what happened! Why did it go wrong? What did you learn from it and what would you recommend others that go maybe through a similar journey right now? There's the value that's the magic sauce."

Arthur: "Any interesting customer sharings or stories that was shared to you guys or anyone who was working on this program?"

Bram: "Well, I will say when you ask about any particular stories, the thing that surprises me most having done this for nine years around the globe different locations, talking to folks in different regions, different verticals, whether they are education, health care, manufacturing. The interesting part is that when we listen to the stories, they're all very similar. They're all having different difficult problems to solve, but they all are somewhat in the same boat, trying to figure out how to convince their managers to implement this technology, convincing their employees to learn a new skill, to convince management that this is a good investment.

And the part that's unique about the IT Management program and the managers that attend this versus the technologist that goes to the technical breakouts. A technologist once the technology works, let's say to develop an application, they are done, they've finished, the application works, the technology runs. In management, you have to see that through all the way to user adoption, all the way to realizing the business value on the investment that you're initially made. And that sets the technologist apart from the manager who needs to lead this and encourage their employees to get new skill sets out there and seeing that project all the way through business realization. And that's what we focus so much on not just technology but on leadership and culture."

Arthur: "Where do you see IT Management or IT at center stage perhaps in the coming years? Where do you see it perhaps growing or evolving or changing into? Any thoughts or-or maybe predictions?"

Bram: "Well I predict that it will continue to grow. However, I would put a big note by that it will only grow if we can keep the same level of intimacy and feedback and interaction. Otherwise it would be great for us to grow, but it's not great for our customers. And that is what I predict we continue to focus on is to make sure that this is a great experience for the attendees, a great experience that they have something to take away and apply on Monday when they go back to their work. That they're proud of being in technology, that they're motivated and inspired that they believe in the thought leadership that we share and that they share with us. What works but also what doesn't work so that we can continually improve."

Sarah: "I would love to see us become an industry recognized leadership program and maybe in the future even one day by participating in ITM, you get some sort of accreditation or you get some sort of certificate that the employers know and they see and they recognize that by taking part in this program, you are learning valuable leadership skills.

Also really looking forward to getting more down to the local level and to smaller group areas. You know ITM coming to you where you're at. So, we're looking at new opportunities with the Cisco Connects events and how we can bring IT Leadership to those events locally."

Arthur: "Final thoughts from either of you?"

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Bram: "I will say that this event has now sold out for nine years in a row. We don't expect that to change and our tenth-year anniversary we have a couple of surprises up our sleeves. We have a couple of secret things that we're working on. Out tenth year is going to be a celebration, not just having IT be in the back room in the back office, but now having IT on the center stage."

Arthur: "For those listening, Bram just dropped the mic."

Sarah: "I would say yes it's definitely going to be a party. You don't want to miss it and like Bram was saying you want to RSVP early, so make sure that you do come and experience it. Let us know your thoughts. Bram and I are always there in the front row, come say hi to us and let us know how we can make this a better event for you or what you like about it. And we're literally looking forward to seeing you at ITM!"

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