

S5E12 Chris Barber

SPEAKERS

Chris Barber, Peter Margaritis

Peter Margaritis

Hey, welcome back everybody. This is gonna be an interesting episode because I've known this gentleman since 2016. I met him at a Better Business Bureau meeting in Baltimore, Maryland. He's one hilarious guy, great guy to work with. And his name is Chris Barber and Chris, or do you want to be referred to as Christopher in this episode.

Chris Barber

I'm Chris all the way. Are you going by Pete and Peter?

Peter Margaritis

I'm both. Just don't call me Petey. I'm not that dog from Little Rascals. So, you can say you can tell that we have a good time. And Chris, first and foremost one thank you for taking time out of your busy day. You're like a super ball in a very small room. You're bouncing all the time. But taking time out of your business to spend more time with me on this podcast.

Chris Barber

Absolutely. Absolutely. Happy to do it, man.

Peter Margaritis

I've been looking forward to this when I found out you're doing these interviews. And being my IT guy, I'm thinking about a pandemic. What was the number one thing that you saw pop up that was a big challenge that maybe you're a little bit unexpected about when we had to hunker all down at home?

Chris Barber

There was a actually, Pete, there were two things that really threw me off. So, we're in Maryland, and I'm not going to get political here but our governor did a pretty good job with the Coronavirus response. But what that looked like was he shut us down rather quickly. So, we had I don't know what, what it's like out there. But here, we have one day's notice. So, we're all told, you know, tomorrow everybody works from home. Wow. So um, you know, a lot of people ask like, wow, did you guys make a killing with the big work from home push? And the answer is no, because everybody had to scramble so fast. Most of our clients didn't even call us. They just told their employees, pick up your laptops. Go home. You know, we'll figure it out later. And, you know, I'm just joking if Governor Hogan had given everybody two weeks notice, which he couldn't have done but had he done that, we would have cleaned up. But he didn't. Everybody's scattered and we unfortunately missed the boat on that revenue opportunity. A few folks later on, hit us up and said, hey, you know we scrambled to work from home, and would you believe that it's just not working out very well? You know, clean this up for us. And of

course we did. But um, yeah, it was weird. I never anticipated a phenomenon like that. So, that was one thing. And then the other thing was cybersecurity attacks went through the roof. It was crazy. You know, we we handle security for quite a few operations, and the targeted phishing attacks and firewall attacks and just the malware in general, skyrocketed. It was clear that the bad guys were convinced this COVID-19 thing was a revenue opportunity for them. And um, you know, it made our job harder, but I suppose you could also say it made us a little more relevant too,. So, I guess that was a good thing. But it was very surprising the uptick. There's always been an upward trend of that, but, you know, it's depending on how you define the metrics. It was like a two or three fold increase, just like that March 2020. It was really crazy.

Peter Margaritis

So, I would assume a lot of these attacks were going on in large organizations. Was it also happening on smaller ones as well? I mean, were they....

Chris Barber

Oh, yeah. So, depending on what you're talking about. The effort level on the part of the bad guy is really not any different large entity, small entity. It's pretty low barrier to entry, if you will, to launch a lot of these attacks. So um, there is a presumption among a lot of these bad guys where they're, the smaller entities are less fortified, the security's lower, maybe perhaps more gullible. They might not have formal training on what to look out for as far as like your email goes, stuff like that. So, you know, small businesses are constantly under attack, and that's kind of the space that we play in. We specialize in the smaller small businesses. So um, you know, they NEED IT security, just as good and just as badly as, say, a 5000 seat entity, but they don't have the budget for that. And that's kind of what we've always hung our hat on is that we cater to that aspect of the community.

Peter Margaritis

Well, being a client of yours and I have not been attacked, so I guess your security is keeping the bad guys away from me, and I greatly appreciate that.

Chris Barber

Thank you.

Peter Margaritis

I'm suspicious of all emails and texts and stuff anymore, that just don't look right or feel, right. But I imagined that that kind of that part of the business is that the attack slowed down as we've gotten deeper, deeper into the pandemic?

Chris Barber

Not really, not really. There wasn't any additional crazy upticks, but they kind of went up and stayed up. So, not sure what that's all about, but um, it was important pre... it was important to have a good security posture pre-pandemic, but it's even more important to have one now.

Peter Margaritis

Prior to the pandemic, I got a call from the guy who developed my website there for years. He goes, "Did you make a nasty joke about Putin and the Russians?" "No, why?" "Well, apparently their attacking your website. We've been able to keep them away." I don't..I don't mess with Putin. Not one bit.

Chris Barber

I wouldn't recommend it.

Peter Margaritis

I wouldn't know. Not one bit. Yeah, me walking down the streets of Worthington, Ohio and somebody will put like a knife up against my neck and next thing you know, boom, there we go.

Chris Barber

No more Margaritis.

Peter Margaritis

And we've killed that inflammation that Margaritiss. So, I mean, eventually, this will all come to an end. Eventually, we will be past this pandemic and vaccines will be out there. There might still be a few, some people who wear masks. Well, what do you see as that next big challenge as we begin to navigate away out of this pandemic and getting back to... I've heard a few places that people want to kind of restore what we've been. I don't think we can do that. But what does that future look like?

Chris Barber

No, it's hard to say. You know, owning a...being a business owner is like a pretty difficult proposition in normal times, and now you've got this thing. You know, the short answers nobody knows. Because we've never really gone through this before but um, you know, it's funny, I don't know if you've seen this, but it's, it's really polarizing. It seems like everybody is all for going back to the office or all for staying at home. I have not met anybody that's like, well, could go either way. I don't really care. You know, like everybody's got an opinion. So, I had been advocating for well over a decade before the pandemic that we should be seeing more work from home behavior. The technology is certainly there. But also if you have a job where your output is measurable, which is a lot of jobs. There's not a whole lot to talk about. You know, it's really, at that point, kind of an old school proposition to say, well, I need to see the person and I need to make sure they're sitting at their desk. You know, if you're a salesperson with a sales quota, and you're hitting it, does anybody really care if you're in your pajamas, or if you only clocked in for four hours that day? I mean, if you're getting your job done, you're getting your job done. So, I think some of this work from home shift is going to be permanent and probably for the betterment of everybody. But, uh, you know, and then of course, you get the whole commercial real estate, like what's, what's that gonna do? You know, we're in the process of... we rent a Commercial Suite right now, but we were in the process of looking to buy something and, you know, now you're like, do we wait, see what happens? You know, because it's just such a state of flux right now. But, um, the security attacks, they're real, you know, so we're throwing most of our R&D behind staying ahead of these bad guys and keeping everybody safe.

Peter Margaritis

So, where you're at right now is that your corporate office or is that your home office?

Chris Barber

This is the home one.

Peter Margaritis

So, I was going to say. It has that feel more of a home office. You've got your putting green behind you with your handful of golf balls, and the lightsabers. And the lightsabers, you know. And all of your conference badges and stuff. And that's funny you should mention that because that was one of my questions when the pandemic hit. A lot of people have grown to find out we're more productive at home than we weren't the office and reduce that footprint, that commercial real estate footprint. It's an organization's... Let me ask you this question. One of the things that I thought about when the pandemic hit, and we all had to go home and work. How secure and you're talking about, about how secure is someone's network, and they're picking up that cost. So, were you able to your client, say you have 10 employees...were you able to go in and help them get set up or when you had to go clean some stuff up or you're working with them directly one on one, or did the owner saying we need to pick up the cost and make sure that we've got this more of a permanent type of nature? The lightsabers.

Chris Barber

Yeah, for the most part, it was on the employer. What was interesting was, um, you know, so many things in IT, and probably every business, but certainly IT, you know, if you say you want to make a secure environment, there's like 1000 ways you get there. You know, and a lot of it comes down to, you know, the IT providers philosophy. We've always subscribed to a school of thought that you should take security down to the endpoint level. So, basically the computer level. So, you can do network level, you can go beyond the network level, but you could just you could also just focus on the computer itself. And that's always been the primary way that we deliver security. And I was at a luncheon a few years ago, where they had the cybersecurity Director of the FBI for, it's kind of weird how they put together Maryland and Delaware. I don't know why they put those two together. But he was giving a talk to a whole bunch of IT providers and he asked the room he's like, how many of you folks are focusing strictly on the endpoint level? And I was the only person to raise my hand. But he said, that guy right there, he's doing it right. You know, we're the FBI so here's why. So, it's always been a good strategy. So, what ended up happening, Pete, is when everybody started working from home, for the most part, the security they had in place, that's all they needed, you know. Which I couldn't tell you that we had that kind of a crystal ball and we knew that everybody's gonna work from home but, you know, it scaled well. You know what I mean. So, in certain circumstances, we had to ramp up the security a little bit, but for the most part, I mean, it just worked. And it's funny what you were saying about the commercial real estate, you know, I'm broadcasting live from my own house. Before the pandemic, I took a business development class at Johns Hopkins that was, gosh, I guess it was about three months, and involve being out of the office one, sometimes two full days a week, which is a big ask for a business owner.

Peter Margaritis

Yeah.

Chris Barber

And um, I was talking with somebody who graduated from the program and she said because she was missing an action every Thursday, that when she graduated from the program, she owns a restaurant in Fells Point in Baltimore. She said, um, I just started working from home on Thursdays, the staff was just me not being there. And I got so much work done. And I'm like, oh, that's brilliant. I'm going to do that. So, pre-pandemic, right before the pandemic, I started working from home on Thursdays, and I only can pull it off about every other week. You know, things kept getting in the way. I kept getting dragged into meetings where like, there were just so many people, I couldn't ask them to reschedule it. Um, and then the pandemic hit and I was like, alright, well, you know, like a lot of businesses, we were considered essential. So, we were open. The office is open, but we weren't having folks, you know, other folks come in. And I wanted to keep every staff member in their own room. I felt like that was kind of a safer way to spread it out a little bit. But that involved...we have some folks that are already working from home, but that involves me working from home all the time. And, you know, suddenly I went from maybe one day every other week to five, six days a week without fail. And it's weird, man. You know, the first thing that hit me I don't know if this happened to you, but I didn't realize how much time I spent in the car. So, when we got locked down, I'm like, Dude, I just got two to three hours a day back by not driving. Wow, I was driving all the time. You know, that's crazy. That's crazy. All these hours just suddenly fell into my lap. It was great.

Peter Margaritis

Yeah, I... Well, I've been working at that time I was working from home for a number of years. So, when it hit, I just I didn't even flinch. Except on my side of it was, I had two full-time FTEs in my house. My wife and son, and they really weren't worth a damn. I tried to put them on a warning. Tried to fire them. Tried to do everything. It's like nope couldn't do it. They wouldn't listen to me. The only two that would listen to me was the two dogs. They were part-time. So, I was like, but I'm... you know, but I during the pandemic and I got real claustrophobic. And I got a buddy who had some space. He said, "Look, I've been talking about you know, subletting this space. You want to give it a try?" And I said yeah. And there at first going, I'm driving to work. This is so cool. I'm in traffic again. I forgot what this was like. It was short lived. It was short lived. It's like it was just like the opposite effect. But then, then as I started coming down here more and more, I went, Okay, the human interaction still is critical to some degree, just that, you know, this is interaction like that face to face, no screen behind a computer or anything like that. It just, it was fun again. It was absolutely fun again, because I remember when I moved into my office at home, I was done with this day in day out grind. So, there's some type of balance that's out there. As we begin to wrap up, I do have an interesting question that just popped into my head because that was looking at your LinkedIn profile. You've been in business for 22 years. So, you must have started when you were 10?

Chris Barber

Aww, man. You're awesome. Pete. I was twelve.

Peter Margaritis

Did you just start on your own or did you have a couple of people at the time?

Chris Barber

I started off on my own. Did I ever tell you the origin story?

Peter Margaritis

No.

Chris Barber

I'll give you the fast version. So, I used to be an auto theft investigator. And that was way more fun. Um, long story short, I felt like, you know, the technology was going to evolve in a way where that industry was going to kind of sort of disappear, which is largely what's happened. So, I was planning a new career change and decided to build a computer and see if IT was the answer for me. And end up having to engage with a computer repair place and discovered that this industry is just chock full of terrible terrible, god awful customer service. So, I was like, Wow, if I started an IT company with good customer service that focuses on the client, wow, that would be like a key differentiator. So, that's how it all got started. At my girlfriend at that times dining room, and um, you know, the rest is history. So, 22 years in business as of a few weeks ago, and we've won more awards for our customer service than all the IT companies in the area. There's 1637 of us. So, that's what we get excited about.

Peter Margaritis

So you start off by yourself How many employees do you have now?

Chris Barber

I like to say we're a huge organization. There's seven of us.

Peter Margaritis

Seven of you.

Chris Barber

Including me.

Peter Margaritis

That's still seven mouths and seven families. So, thinking what would you do different back then if you knew what you knew now?

Chris Barber

Oh, gosh. That's always such a good question. I, um, owning a business is not for the faint of heart. You know, it's like doing a high wire act with no net, you know, and it's scary. And if you make the wrong mistake, sign the wrong contract, you might not have a house anymore. You know, it's crazy, the risk. So, I've always been very, very cautious and very conservative. Um, because I don't want to lose my house or you know, I don't want to be in a situation where I can't feed the kids. But I'm looking back, I think it was a little too cautious, because that could stifle your growth as well. So, it's a balancing act. I think if I could find a younger Chris, I'd be like take chances, man! You're onto something.

Peter Margaritis

Take some risks. But you know, like you said, it's Cheaper Than a Geek, and you the Chief Geek, and those professions that are typically more technical in nature, and tend to be more risk averse.

Chris Barber

That's a good point.

Peter Margaritis

Yeah, accountants...

Chris Barber

Yeah, that's legit.

Peter Margaritis

Even in their own businesses. And I think I kind of follow that same thing. I love taking risk. But I think when I first started this business, I didn't take enough risks.

Chris Barber

Yeah.

Peter Margaritis

And now, I'm trying to take more and I'm going okay, well, it's, you know, I fail a lot, but it's not as bad as I thought it was gonna be. That's the key. That was the key.

Chris Barber

That's the lesson I keep learning.

Peter Margaritis

Yeah.

Chris Barber

It is not as bad as I thought it would be. Geez, I probably should have done that years ago. You know, every time I pick up, I'm like, well, that worked out and I should have done that years ago.

Peter Margaritis

Yes, absolutely. The gift that keeps on giving. Well, buddy, I appreciate your time. I know you're busy. And I will be getting up back into the Baltimore area, hopefully soon, actually, maybe even next week. And if I do get up that way, let's go meet at a restaurant and have a adult beverage or thirty or seven or just a couple. Ah, man. I truly appreciate it. Thanks so much.

Chris Barber

Thank you for having me, man.

Peter Margaritis

I want to thank Chris for sharing his knowledge and vision on the importance of having an IT service provider as part of your team. It's critical. And also remember there are those people who prefer to say yes, and there are people who prefer to say no. Those who say yes are rewarded by the adventures that they have. Those who say that are rewarded by the safety they obtain. Be a yes person. Thank you all for listening.