

## **Playing in the top right quadrant: Networks Unlimited marks 20 years in business**

*From guiding SA enterprises through the early days of networking, to fielding a 'top right quadrant' portfolio addressing all the current ICT buzzwords, Networks Unlimited has made its first 20 years a true SA success story.*

Now a value-added distributor of best of breed security, networking, convergence and storage solutions, with a presence in four regions in South Africa and up to 19 markets across Africa, Networks Unlimited was launched in 1994 as a Network Management Consultancy.

Co-founders Craig Copeland and Wayne Bird, both originally from Cape Town, launched this new ICT business in what was then an immature market. Copeland's business background and Bird's technical background was the perfect combination to ensure a holistic approach to the start-up. Copeland explains: "In 1994, networks in South Africa were still in their early stages. People were just putting their networks in and were challenged by the cost and complexity. We launched in Cape Town and found ourselves playing a consultancy role, as well as selling cost-effective networking technologies."

Three years later, the founders saw the market changing, with new needs emerging, and they formed what was essentially a second company – a value-added distributorship focused on content security. This became Networks Unlimited's key focus as the company evolved. Bird says Networks Unlimited has always focused on best of breed technologies relevant to the South African market's requirements. "Some of the solutions we have brought to market are early adoption and disruptive technologies, and too early for many local enterprises to invest in. Now, we spread our portfolio between technologies that are commercially sound and mature, and some that are brand new and disruptive. You will find that most of our solutions are ranked in Gartner's top right quadrant, and that they address all of the latest buzzwords – such as BYOD, software defined networking, virtualisation, cloud, convergence, cyber security and advanced threat protection. We

are always striving to stay ahead of the game.”

As an independent value added distributor, Networks Unlimited has faced business challenges and steep learning curves over the years. Its co-founders say one of the biggest challenges has been vendor changes and mergers and acquisitions, which took key products out of their hands. “This was out of our control, but we have learnt to spread the risk and ensure that now we have a broader range of solutions in each solution portfolio,” says Copeland. The company also discovered early that scope for growth in Cape Town was limited. “We had to move into other markets – notably Johannesburg,” says Copeland. “However, we should have established a permanent presence in Johannesburg earlier”.

Networks Unlimited’s founders initially commuted to Johannesburg to meet resellers and customers, and only established a permanent presence in the city in 2000. The company later expanded to Durban and the Eastern Cape too. Another key learning was that each of these markets is very different in its approach and the solutions it needs. “For example, while markets in Cape Town and Durban tend to be very relationship-based, in Johannesburg, the market is all about business. In Johannesburg, customers are more willing to test new things, and tend to make decisions faster,” says Copeland.

With both founders still playing highly active roles as Directors in the business, Anton Jacobsz is now Managing Director of Networks Unlimited. He believes the company’s success rests on its focused approach, highly skilled technical expertise, and strong support of its partner network. “Our success rate on renewals testifies to the high levels of customer loyalty we have achieved. We typically hit 90% and up on renewals.”

With up to 800 channel partners – around 200 of them highly active – Networks Unlimited focuses heavily on partner support and skills development. “We have built trust in the channel and good relationships with vendors,” says Jacobsz.

While the company has shown strong growth in its first 20 years, it is not resting on its laurels. Networks Unlimited has ambitious growth plans into the rest of Africa, with a possible East African office in the pipeline within the next year. It also plans to increase the contribution of new technologies to its revenue, aiming to keep

South African enterprises on top of an ever-changing IT game.

**Networks Unlimited's top tips for aspiring entrepreneurs**

[if !supportLists]1. [endif]Go where the biggest potential market is and establish a permanent presence there under strong leadership.

[if !supportLists]2. [endif]In distribution, depending too much on one single vendor solution is risky.

[if !supportLists]3. [endif]Perseverance and strong relationships with vendors, channel partners and customers are key to success.

[if !supportLists]4. [endif]High-end technical skills are scarce in South Africa. Be prepared to continually upskill technical staff, only to have them move on.