

## Leaders Council Podcast Episode

### Values Driven Success with Kevin Towers, Techbuyer

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#### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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My name is Scott Challinor, and you are listening to the Leaders Council podcast, for the people who run the country and the people who keep the country running.

As our regular listeners on this programme will indeed know very well, part of our mission here at the Leaders Council is to bring you a variety of distinct perspectives on leadership. And to this end, we are joined on the programme today by Kevin Towers, the CEO of Techbuyer, a business that provides sustainable IT solutions to organisations across more than one hundred countries.

Kevin, very warm welcome today. And thank you for joining us on the show, dialing in from all the way in the US, I believe.

00:43

Thank you very much, Scott. Yes, that is right. Thanks for having me.

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It is a real pleasure, Kevin. And obviously, for those people that are listening in that are not familiar with Techbuyer and what the company does, we are going to be talking about the business, the values driven success and how the company came into being and developed and its sustainable principles.

So just going right the way back to the beginning of the business, I think it would be good to start by addressing how Techbuyer first come into being?

01:18

Okay, thanks very much. Yes, well, we are a sustainable IT solutions provider.

And really, the core of the business is built around, or was built around originally, buying back used IT equipment that had been used by corporate clients. Refurbishing it, bringing it back to factory standards, and then reselling it. We had humble beginnings back in the day, we have been going since 2005. We started off in my mom's garage, you know, God bless her soul. She put us up for a good few years. And that's how we started, humble beginnings, yes.

02:03

It certainly seems the case. And obviously, from those humble beginnings, starting the business from home at your parents' house, you have grown to a business that now employs over 250 people, and working in 100 countries, and three different continents as of this year, as well. So how did you get from that starting position to growing the business, so exponentially?

02:32

Quite honestly, you know, the staff. When we first started the business, really, the main objective was just to put food on the table. And, you know, it was very challenging to get the business going back in those days, very much hand to mouth. Within the business, we did not have a lot of cash flow resource, and so on. So, the people who started the company, we would work very, very, very hard, very, very, very long hours, to get things going. We brought a lot of junior staff into the business in those early days, we really spent a lot of time training those guys and girls, in our way of working. Just kind of going the extra mile, you know, working the extra hours in order to get things rolling, get things moving. And in those early years, growth was quite limited. It was not until probably, I guess sort of 5, 6, 7, 8 years into the business that things really started to get going. And in the last few years, you are right. A lot of things have dropped into place nicely. And we are enjoying very, very fast growth at the moment.

03:52

Yes, and obviously, the way the business developed in those very formative years, has remained a real cornerstone of the company's values. And that people philosophy, that community philosophy, and you know, the sustainability elements have underpinned everything that you have done since then, hasn't it? And obviously, it is not just the business itself and the number of employees that you have that is grown, it is also the spectrum of services that is developed with that as well?

Obviously, you started out as you say, selling used IT equipment, but now you provide a full range of solutions. So that includes sustainable IT services such as refurbishment disposition, buy back spare parts, so the full range of solutions, but also consultancy as well.

So, it's fair to say that the business really has grown in more ways than one, hasn't it?

04:48

Yes, certainly. I think that core group of people has grown and developed together over the years and certainly in recent years, we have diversified quite significantly, where we now have bases in the USA, which is where I am now. Also in Australia, New Zealand, France, Germany, Canada, more recently as well. But it's really been about, you know, building and growing a really good group of people that feel like they're supported, feel like they like each other, feel like they can work well together, feel like they're comfortable to come up with their own ideas and suggestions about how they can improve either their own work area, or, more broadly speaking, ideas for diversification of the business for doing things in a different way. So, it has all been very much around, the people, I certainly would not describe myself as a technical expert or anything like that. But what the thing that I have really tried to work hard on is building that kind of community within the company. And that has led to a really nice place to work in each of the different offices. You know, creating a nice environment to work, brings a healthy willingness to work hard as well, that turns into a really productive environment.

And you are absolutely right, so we started out doing refurbishing used IT equipment, and we now offer our customers and clients are a fully circular business model. We sell refurbished new IT solutions to start-up businesses, we continue to buy back the old equipment, refurbish, and resell it again.

And more recently, we now provide sustainability services and consultancy to those businesses. And, again, more recently to government as well.

06:55

Yes, so exponential growth of the service provision as well. The growth of the business is something that has not gone unnoticed, has it? The business, of course, won a multitude of awards, certainly in the last couple of years, but also was recognised as one of the top one hundred fastest growing businesses in the north of England at the Northern Tech Awards this year.

But given the people philosophy that you have, I get the impression that success at Techbuyer, isn't just measured on recognition and awards from outside the business? So, what is your definition of success? What does success really look like for the business?

07:38

That is a good question. There is a multitude of different things. But again, for me, personally speaking, you know, everybody has a role. We have lots of goals and got lots of targets. Throughout the business, everybody has their own aims and progression plans and personally speaking working with the people and seeing them progress is the most important thing. I think that most of our senior directors within the business today, and managers are people who started with the business in their early 20s, or mid 20s, and plus years down the line now, they are senior managing directors, and, you know, for me, that brings a lot of pride, it's been really, really, great to see. So, for me, personally, I think, continued growth, you know, it is always good to aim for growth, continued happy people that feel like they have a plan. And continued diversification, I think, in the IT market and in the technology market in general is so huge. There is a lot more that we can do with the team that we have.

09:03

So you're constantly looking at what more you can do and then measuring success, elements, and as you do more, of course, you measure the outcomes of that. Would you say that is also important for your view of success?

09:19

Yes, yes, I think so. Yes, we have a group holding companies within the UK. And then we have warehouses in a number of different countries and businesses in a number of different countries. And they have all got their individual growth. In recent times, we have been growing at 25% year on year, and I am looking to continue that. There is a number of things that are going to feed into that. The worldwide shortage in supply and various raw materials supplies, plays nicely into our hands because we hold stock of a lot of refurbished items, for example that are good as alternatives to new equipment, and I think that's nicely positioned us for future growth. But yes, certainly sales growth, growth in the number of employees, you know, all yardsticks to successes. But my primary aim is always the people,

there is no point in having huge growth if you do not have a happy team, because at some point, the wheels fall off. So, I very much personally, look to make sure that we have a happy team in place. that fuels the growth.

10:35

Yes. Yes, certainly does. Yes. We have established the parameters for success, so what would you say would then be the driving force behind the success of the business against those parameters that you have laid out? What makes the people within the business happy? What paves the way for that growth? What would you say the sort of secret is, as it were?

11:02

It is a good question. I think, first, people need to know that you care about them. It sounds a little bit groovy. But once that kind of two-way relationship is made and is built within people and in teams, it turns into increased productivity, quite honestly. So, that is the bedrock.

11:34

Yes, so I get the impression that there is more of a collaborative approach. So, whereas within some businesses, you might have, like, 1, 2, or 3 individuals that are the problem solvers that you go to, to sort of resolve everything. But within Techbuyer that really does not seem to be the case. Everybody has the opportunity to kind of chip in and everybody feels appreciated.

12:00

Yes, that is right. And we very much encourage ideas sharing and collaboration and that sort of thing. And there are one or two things that we do differently to really, any other organisation that I am aware of. For example although, we pay bonuses to staff, i.e. sales staff, and that sort of thing we don't pay individual bonuses, generally speaking, we pay team bonuses, and we incentivize people for working together, working collaboratively. We don't want to foster silos, to make sure that information is shared, opportunities are shared between people in teams. It is very easy, especially within, a growing organisations to have a tendency for people to look out for their own interests to operate in silos, that sort of thing. Where our emphasis is on trying to make sure that there is as much collaboration as possible, because, again, you know, self-interest rarely, rarely works.

13:02

And I suppose, when you have a team of people who are sort of, you know, willing to speak up, I guess, contentious issues become less contentious. And then everybody has kind of like, maybe not necessarily conflicting ideas, but different ideas to contribute, I suppose that kind of challenging of ideas amongst groups, that friendly challenge, I guess that it's imperative to driving innovation forward as well, isn't it? So that sort of shows the importance of that kind of team mentality? And having lots of different opinions at the table, doesn't it?

13:41

It does. Yes. And we have to work quite hard to make sure that people do feel comfortable with, you know, raising ideas that may concern something that isn't working or could be done better. You know, people are not always willing to stand up and put their hand up and be the person that points that out.

So, again, it is something that we work quite hard on in making sure that there's good relationships between everyone, so people do feel comfortable to point out issues because otherwise, you know, that issue is going to pop up and bite us in the bottom at some point. So, we do work hard to try and make sure that people feel comfortable to put their hand up.

14:26

Yes, absolutely. Right. And that is perfectly understandable. And obviously, one of the big things that the teams uphold is the sustainable elements of the business. And I do want to delve into that a little bit more, because obviously, we established early on in this discussion that Techbuyer and sustainability basically go hand in hand. But given the kind of, let us say, the wastefulness of the tech sector because it is so difficult to recycle so many technological materials, particularly with laptops and things like that, it might seem outwardly that technology and sustainability should not go together. They are almost like a kind of a contradiction in a sense, but it's sort of Techbuyer's role in a sense to try and, you know, challenge that kind of status-quo idea and show that actually, you know, tech and sustainability can come together and can be part of that circular economy.

15:22

I think so. Yes. So, we were operating in a circular fashion before, really before the circular economy was even a sort of a catchphrase. Obviously, now it is a very big focus – sustainability. The world only has a finite number of natural resources. So, we have always operated in that way. And I think that, you can easily think that you know, tech and sustainability do not really go together, but we are all about reuse. So, you know, technology drives the world, that is just a fact and that is not going to change. So, what our ambition is really is just to make sure that as much as possible, in terms of computing equipment, is reused. Because really, in the past, we had a society for the past 40 years or so where, you know, take it out of the ground, make stuff and throw it away, take make throw away. So, we are really fighting against that, and making sure we are trying to make sure we do our best to make sure that as much as possible is reused, put back into the economy. You know, an old laptop might, might be worthless to you, but it could be refurbished, reused in schools and charities, you know, put back into businesses in emerging nations. Yes, there is all sorts that can be done. As opposed to, you know, the traditional route in recent years; people talk about recycling, you know, recycling is good, but it only goes so far, reuse is much better, because you're putting the equipment back into the hands of people who can use it straightaway, rather than wasting all that time, money, energy and carbon and breaking it down, and then building it back up again.

17:18

Yes, that is absolutely right. And there is something as well, that kind of has really highlighted the importance of that sort of sustainable outlook. I mean, we talked about the fact that the Earth has very finite resources. So, things like cobalt mining, for laptops, mobile phones, I mean, that is a resource that if we keep using it in the way that we are, is not going to be around forever. We've been made acutely aware of the urgency of the climate emergency, given the events of the last couple of years with COVID, as well haven't we. The fact that the climate emergency is the next big thing that we're all going to have to face together. So, it just shows the urgency of the action that you are taking, doesn't it? And hopefully, you know, there may be other business leaders that are tuning into this discussion and might

be thinking, well, what can we do? How can we kind of come on board with this and sort of make our own businesses sustainable and you know, reduce our environmental impact?

18:17

Yes. Society throws away an inordinate amount of e-waste, it's the fastest growing waste stream in the world. And it very much needs to be a focus. And it is, you know, very much is, things are changing for sure. So, I think businesses, individuals, need to not throw things away, sell it if you possibly can. If you are a business, you know, a company like us will be able to at least dispose of the equipment in a safe and secure and environmentally friendly way. Very possibly, if people have old IT equipment, we will be able to buy it back. So, we will be able to give them some money, to put back into their business to spend on other things.

So, it's just a sensible thing to do. Do not throw it away, see if you can do something with it. If you can give it to a company like ourselves, that will do our best to put it back into reuse. You know, we don't only refurbish and then put it back into reuse, we break items down into spare parts and we use those spare parts to, you know, to improve other items. So, again – it's a sensible thing to do. You know, it is very much built into our DNA. My mother always used to say, waste not want not which was one of the catchphrases back in the day. And that is all we should do, you know, see what we can do.

19:53

It is important to stress its far more than just a gimmick, or a post COVID fad. I mean, this is something that is incredibly important if action is not taken, you know, we are going to find ourselves quickly running out of certain resources. We are going to find that there could be some significant damage done, certainly from a global temperature perspective.

20:16

Yes, that is absolutely true. You are right. There is only a finite amount of resource in in the world. And we are using it very, very quickly. I have heard it quoted that we are using things at twice the rate that the world can replenish. So, it certainly needs to be a focus. And as I say, and you pointed out some of the raw materials impacted. Electronic equipment in general, is a big focus and needs to be a big focus. They say it is the fastest waste stream in the world. And we need to curtail what we use, and reuse what we can.

20:58

Absolutely right. And interestingly, as well, when we think about the future of the tech sector, certainly, this podcast is going to be just for the listeners tuning in, the first part of a three-part series with Techbuyer's senior leadership team, of course, we have Kev with us today. But we are going to be later talking with Techbuyer's sustainability lead, Astrid Wynne. And, Rich Kenny, as well, the managing director of the Interact division who heads up Techbuyer's research team to talk about innovation in the area of sustainability. So, there is plenty more to come on that side of things. And the reason I wanted to bring up the fact that those discussions will be coming up very soon, is that into the future there's legislation on the horizon, which businesses need to be aware of. The impact of carbon emissions that they are going to be emitting and trying to regulate those. So, with all of that in mind with those kinds of changes on the horizon, and, you know, governments trying to sort of shoehorn business into being

more sort of sustainable conscious, how do you see the tech industry developing from this point in time into the future?

22:12

There is very much going to be a focus on sustainability and reuse. In fact, we are seeing the major brands out there talking about these issues a lot. I think we will continue to see that many businesses have a much greater focus on their ESG goals, on sustainability. In terms of a tech bias, specifically or you know, tech by group. We have, as you just mentioned been working on a new software tool over the last few years. And I think you will talk to Rich Kenny about this in more detail in the next episode or in one of our next episodes. That piece of software is a world first a unique piece of software. And it helps organisations that are running data centres to analyse that data centre server estate for energy efficiency, carbon footprint, carbon use, performance, and enables them to come up with alternative configuration. Potentially alternative technology that they can use within their data centres to drive operational energy efficiency and help them reduce their carbon footprint. These kinds of issues are going to become very much more at the forefront of people's minds. And I think there's gonna be a much greater focus on that on reducing energy reducing carbon footprint.

Absolutely right. Are you going to be targeting further sustainable growth as well for Techbuyer as a business? What is next for yourselves from that perspective, do you think?

24:09

Well, I think for us, it is going to be more of the same continued growth in the US in the United Kingdom, and also further afield in our other operations in Europe and APAC and the USA. And looking at growth of our online ambitions as well, we run a number of different websites that sell predominantly refurbished equipment and spare parts. We are going to push those websites, trying to do more and make to make our products and services available to more more clients in those regions, and beyond. And, yes, we are going to be pushing into that very hard. We have had some really nice successes recently. You know, we are fortunate, in many ways that we are in a prime place to do more of what we are doing today.

25:17

Exactly right. And with Techbuyer being kind of an emerging service; I suppose that kind of pre-existing monopoly was there in the supply and repair side of the industry, which bigger providers have dominated for so long. Do you see sort of a real levelling of the playing field?

25:39

I think so. Yes. As I mentioned earlier, that everybody knows about the component issues, the chip shortages, and that really does play into our hands and other organisations like ourselves, who are selling refurbished products as an alternative to new at the moment; we also sell new solutions, you know, we sell what's best for the customer. So, we sell new, and we sell refurb, a lot of the new equipment now is on a 12-month lead time and 18 months lead time. But what it is doing is, it is forcing companies and people to think about alternative supply, to think about refurb as a viable solution. In the past we have benchmarked refurb against new in live environments and at big trade shows - backed up with research. It's is a very, very, very viable alternative to new and in certain circumstances, it can

outperform new equipment. The chip shortage is starting to force organisations to think about alternatives and refurb is becoming much, much more popular. And I see that continuing, I think, you know, the sensible choice is to at least consider research, because you can pay sometimes 50, 60, 70, 80% or less and a new alternative, and you are getting something that performs just as nicely. So, I think that that's going to continue. And I think also, there is a movement within government that is pushing against some of the OEM ways of working in the past. I guess, some of the OEMs have made it quite restrictive in terms of repairing devices that you may have bought, I see that changing, there's a big push called the right to repair in Europe, and in the USA, where people are trying to push for the ability to repair their own devices, utilities, and the ability for third party independent shops to be able to repair devices for you, rather than being forced to send the device back to the OEM and potentially getting charged an extortionate amount for, for a small repair, or being told that the device can't be repaired because it's out of service. But I see a more open market as the bigger choice or the consequences of things about which I have just been talking. And yes, better market to the consumer.

28:37

Yes, that is it is interesting, is not it when you think of what that kind of better consumer market could consist of, because when you think of the bigger end providers, I mean, there are so many software and firmware updates to sort of devices these days that have to be considered as well. So, when it comes to the right to repair, there's so, so much that ties into that. And that is certainly something that I will be talking about in the next episode with Astrid Wynne as well. So please, please do not miss that. And lastly, Kev just before we wrap up, I suppose when it comes to what is on the horizon for the tech sector, a lot of talk is about sort of, you know, the rise in automation and the rise of sort of AI. And some people might be a little bit apprehensive about that side of things, but sort of what is your kind of view on that just before we finish?

29:24

It is really exciting. You know, what technology can do today is just incredible, astounding. And, you know, without the machine learning element, we could not do what we do. So, it is very, very exciting. I think some people, you know, worry about jobs, job losses, that sort of thing. I think it will create jobs. And I think that, you know, it is very, very exciting. I don't think people should be scared about what the future holds, I think they should be excited about technology. And just as long as we are driving improvements, the efficiency, I think we can shift the workforce elsewhere to be utilized in other places for the benefit of everyone. So, the future looks bright.

30:17

It certainly does. And we should really look into the future with open eyes and open arms for sure. And speaking of Interact, as well, again, everyone tuning in. And we will be talking in a lot more detail about that division of Techbuyer and its work with Rich Kenny, who heads that side of things. So again, very, very exciting stuff to tune into later on in the series but for now, Kev, it's been amazing welcoming you on to the show today. And incredibly enlightening, as well really, really enjoyed having you on. And do take care and stay safe with all that still happening in the world. And as we start to see, you know, these projects take hold, and we see their impact. I think it would be a wonderful thing to catch up and have you back on the show in future just to see how things are all coming along.

31:02

Thanks so much Scott, it has been a pleasure. Thank you that would be great. Thank you have a beautiful weekend,

31:07

Yourself as well, Kevin. I would also reiterate that message to all of the listeners tuning in today as well. I do hope that you have thoroughly enjoyed the interview with Kevin Towers today, CEO of Techbuyer, and myself, your host on The Leaders Council podcast, Scott Challinor.

Just a reminder to all tuning in if you do want to find out a little more about Techbuyer and the work that it does, and you feel passionate about some of the issues that we've gone over today, then [techbuyer.com](http://techbuyer.com) would be a good port of call to find out more about the business.

And if you are a business owner and you feel you have your own story to share with us here at the Leaders Council about what your own business is doing or even another issue that is of importance to you. Then by all means you too can apply to be on the programme via [leaderscouncil.co.uk/apply](http://leaderscouncil.co.uk/apply). Until next time to everybody tuning in please do take care and goodbye.