Peter Krockta (PK) is Head of Enterprise Compute Services at New York Life Insurance. Peter manages Infrastructure and Operations, including help desk, data center, network, cloud, telephony, service desk, compute, and service management.

We conducted this interview as part of the **Mantissa Group CIO Series** featuring prominent technology executives.

1. Tell Us about your background, personal and career

I grew up in a working-class household in southeastern Massachusetts with a family who had a strong work ethic. My first job as a teenager was at Burger King where I rode to work on my bicycle every day to earn money and gain early lessons on responsibility, working with people, and customer orientation (which served me well later in life).

I attended college at Bridgewater State University and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Management. My career started as an office manager in the mental health industry where I gained a true appreciation for those less fortunate. It was also a time where I started to develop an affinity for technology and was first exposed to "the network", albeit Banyan Vines. From there, my career path was charted.

After obtaining my **Certified Novell Engineer** (CNE) certification from Boston University, I joined a company as system integrator for small community banks. Then, I went on to a role at BJ's Wholesale Club – as network engineer and realized then my desire to manage people and coach rising leaders. Having decision authority was important to me, so I transitioned from a "*techie*" network infrastructure engineer (hired for switches, routers) to first line manager. Subsequently, I moved on to roles of increasing responsibility at First Marblehead (private student loan processing company), New York Life Retirement Plan Services, John Hancock, and now with New York Life. It has been a fun ride with a lot more to do!

2. What do you think some of the longer-term effects of the current pandemic might be for organizations like yours?

I see the COVID response as a catalyst for culture change. It allowed us to taste what can be done with a singular focus and unified mission. Our reaction, and that of many companies, illustrated how much *can* get done when a company comes together – we pivoted from 98% in the office to 96% work from home. Our reaction, dropping everything for 3 weeks to make a seismic shift in our work environment, and doing so with precision, was remarkable and took a total team effort. In a non-pandemic time, this may have taken a year to do!

Longer term, it will be quite interesting to see where the pendulum will rest when it returns to a new norm. We understand that we are an "in the office" culture, but the pre-COVID and post-COVID realties will be different in terms of acceptance of virtual work.   It is inevitable.

I hope some of the good elements are long lasting – when we were in the thick of it, we made decisions *quickly* with good analysis and instinct, but did not labor over the decision. Our decision-making skills were really on display. I believe this will continue not only for us, but for most companies.

3. What leadership lessons or opportunities have you seen with work-from-home or other matters as the crisis has unfolded?

My personal views have not changed so much. I still root my leadership approach in candor, empowerment, and accountability, but I have learned to connect with people in new ways and to leverage remote-working tools to strengthen relationships. I have a much higher appreciation for the entirety of my team. We implemented technologies quickly and together. I have learned, in an incredibly significant way: the **power of the team**, to be more **accessible**, and to be more **approachable.**

4. Have your priorities changed in the wake of the Pandemic?

The strength of the company and the conservative approach we take when planning for scenarios just like COVID have positioned us well to weather this storm. As a result, COVID was a speedbump; our mission and priorities have not changed. In my role, I remain laser focused on operational stability & efficiency (table stakes), empowering our Agent workforce, and platform modernization.

5. What are the most important digital or technological capabilities that you see on the horizon?

I see this as more about **categories** of technologies rather than specific technologies, per se. Categories being operational efficiency, data, and digital omnipresence.

With that backdrop, this allows me to focus on where to drive change: machine learning, process automation, technologies to empower our Agent workforce to connect with policyholders and prospects in new ways, employee collaboration tools, digital technologies, data mining & analytics to gain insights, wearables, and more.

Mounting technology debt also concerns me. Economic headwinds make it more difficult to commit necessary funding to remediate the legacy elements of the compute landscape. We need to do a better job quantifying the risk of carrying that technical debt and compiling stronger business cases for investing in its remediation (improved IT agility, faster time to market, quicker value realization, etc.).

6. What Advice do you have for those aspiring to technology leadership roles?

Be your authentic self, celebrate differences and engage with your team. Encourage diversity and inclusion and foster an environment where diversity is truly embraced. Watch the signals

you are giving as a leader (e.g. when brainstorming, I do not offer my opinion first).

I also encourage rising leaders to foster a culture of feedback, a culture where your people *want* to be better for the overall benefit of the team.

In general, what got you here will not get you there. Technical acumen, subject matter expertise, supervisory skills… these are table stakes. Getting to that next level requires a mindset shift to focus on *soft skills*: EQ, strong communications, ability to influence, mental agility, positivity in the face of adversity. These are the skills that will differentiate you as a candidate for the next level.

My view, "The further away you are from the keyboard, the less you need to know about configuring a router".

We at Mantissa love the humor 😊