Curt Allen's Journey Continues

Windstream reshuffled its channel leadership in November, enabling longtime industry veteran Curt Allen to transition from channel chief to advisor and start a new role bringing technology solutions to the addiction and recovery space.

By **Gerald** Baldino

As it turns out, Windstream's announcement was part of a restructuring plan that had been in place since Allen came on board back in 2017, when he emerged from retirement and accepted a temporary assignment as channel chief, taking over for Olen Scott.

As Allen explained, Windstream's partner program was making significant inroads during his tenure as channel chief, with the organization shifting toward in-demand solutions like SD-WAN and UCaaS.

Curt Allen

"Things were moving in the right direction, and we felt really good about our business," Allen said. "We were outpacing the company from the standpoint of selling strategic products. In fact, some of the largest customers that we sold during that period came through the channel."

Then Windstream hit a major legal snag, forcing the company to change its course and forcing Allen to start thinking more seriously about the next phase of his life.

Navigating Bankruptcy

In February 2019, Windstream lost a massive court battle against hedge fund Aurelius, pulling the company into bankruptcy and forcing management to make some hard decisions regarding legacy relationships that, as Allen explained, ran counter to their objectives.

"2019 became about working through all of that and trying to drive as many positive outcomes as we could," Allen said.

At this point Allen was overseeing the company's partner channel, all of its reseller teams, and the acquisitions from American Telephone Company (ATC) and MASS Communications.

"I had about a billion dollar organization that we were running, and we really had to put a lot of thought into how to build it for the future and position it in a way that would be responsible to the bond holders," he continued.

Rebuilding Windstream

Around that time, Allen was working closely with Matt Milliron, the company's vice president of channel sales and now channel chief.

"Matt came with a real propensity toward channel integration and the belief that we can't be competing with our partners," Allen said. "It was clear that we had to align."

The team, including vice president of channel sales Eric Solomon, ran a beta test on a channel integration model that proved to be a tremendous success. According to Allen, the program started bringing in $1 million per week during the first few months with this new system in place.

"I can't split atoms, but I can recognize when something's working," Allen said. "So we accelerated that program and moved forward with restructuring our sales organization to become more channel-integrated, recognizing that every large opportunity ultimately has a partner in it. We're either working with them or against them, to quote our CMO Cardi Prinzi."

Allen's original plan was to help get the company to the other side of bankruptcy and then transition out of Windstream midway through 2020. But with the organization picking up steam, Allen decided to make an early handoff to Milliron.

"At this point there is still some fine tuning around team alignments, but we're moving forward with what we call a revenue accountability model," Allen said. "It's kind of a move back to some of the old models where we're putting far more responsibilities into the regions, and realigning some of the operational functions."

Looking forward Allen will continue to have a hand in Windstream as a consultant, and by serving as Chairman Emeritus of their partner advisory council. At the same time, Allen is going in a different direction altogether, and turning his efforts to tackle a critical issue that's ravaging the United States – substance abuse and addiction. The next phase of Allen's career will focus on using technology to provide care and assistance to people in recovery.

From Success to Significance

For Allen, the wheels started turning a few years back, when he read a book called "Halftime: Moving from Success to Significance," by Bob Buford. The book's subtitle stuck with Allen, and caused him to start thinking of ways to start driving meaningful change using the knowledge and experience from his time in the carrier, conferencing and channel spaces.

As it happened, Allen – who will be celebrating nine years of sobriety in January – linked up with colleague and friend Carolyn Bradfield, who is CEO of InterAct LifeLine, a newly formed subsidiary of Convey Services. InterAct provides a turnkey technology solution for addiction treatment and collegiate recovery centers. Built on Convey's portal and network platform, InterAct provides content, forums, outreach and virtual support groups for its members.

Allen joined InterAct's strategic board of advisors in November and will be working on delivering market-based technology solutions to the addiction and recovery community. Much like the business world, the recovery community is facing an urgent demand for modernization and digital transformation.

For example, Allen riffed on the experience of chairing recovery meetings and having to sign pieces of crumpled or torn legal documents for attendees.

"Think of the technology available to us, and that's how we're handling these processes," Allen said. "The addiction and recovery industry is still in a legacy mindset. It's been slow to embrace technology. But what better way to serve this community than with technologies that we've sold and been immersed in for years?"

Focusing on Students

Heading into 2020, InterAct will be making a major push into colleges and universities, where young adults are extremely vulnerable to the pitfalls of substance abuse. Research, for instance, shows that college students comprise one of the largest groups of drug abusers. And those enrolled in a full-time college program are twice as likely to abuse drugs and alcohol.

InterAct will be bringing its platform to more schools nationwide and providing resources for young people.

Addiction by the Numbers

At least 21 million Americans have at least one addiction, yet only 10% receive treatment. Source: AddictionCenter.com
More than 90% of people who have an addiction started to drink or use drugs before they were 18. Source: AddictionCenter.com
Up to 29 percent of patients prescribed opioids for chronic pain abuse them, and between 8 and 12 percent develop a disorder. And about 80 percent of people who use heroin first misused prescription opioids. Source: Drugabuse.gov
The number of teenagers vaping marijuana has doubled over the last two years. Source: National Institute on Drug Abuse

"We will have a column of the business that will utilize Convey's solutions to deliver that platform to all the universities that will consume it so that we can help more and more kids," Allen said. "The idea of recovery communities is to take people typically who got sidetracked – whether it was while they're in high school, college or later in life – and give them an opportunity to attend school because, quite frankly, they have arrests, bad grades from when they were in school, and drained bank accounts from spending money on rehab."

The Rise of the 'AX'

Allen, Bradfield and the rest of the team at InterAct also are focusing on how to leverage cutting-edge technologies to extend the accountability and structure of inpatient rehabilitation during the first few months of outpatient service.

"In some cases, halfway houses can be breeding grounds for further abuse," Allen explained. "Oftentimes, there's no visibility for the people running the halfway houses, even when they're really well intentioned, because they simply don't have the resources. There's not a lot of money in this industry. So, our thinking is, let's enhance that and provide a new approach to help provide accountability."

Wearables, for instance, can help track biomedical signs and provide geo-fencing for addicts so that sponsors can know where patients are at all times. And scheduling tools can be used to demonstrate that addicts are at work, using biometrics.

At the end of the day, the goal is to help people make better choices for themselves so they can become functioning and responsible members of society.

"The thing people need to understand is that addicts are incredibly resourceful," Allen continued. "This program isn't to stop an addict who's dead set on going out and using again. That addict will go out and use if they want to. I'll tell you right now, if I want to drink, I will go out and drink. There's nothing that's going to stop me, whether it's an ankle monitor or anything else. We're simply trying to put some friction between them and that slip. So really it's for the folks that want sobriety but keep getting dragged back. We're going to give extra support and accountability."

What we're seeing at InterAct is a bold transition, and a fresh approach to addiction and recovery. It's also a trend that closely mirrors the customer experience (CX) and employee experience (EX) trends that are sweeping through the enterprise space. Allen referred to the rise of the addict experience (AX), and the world of possibilities that could be applied to help people who want to get better.

Even technologies such as journey mapping can be applied to this new field, helping individuals track, monitor and understand how far they have come – and what's at stake if they make a poor decision.

"Right now, we're open to using whatever applications we can come up with," Allen said. "For example, if you sell someone a geo-fencing platform that uses Wi-Fi so that they know when their customers are within a mile of a restaurant, then why can't I build an app to see when someone is making a stop in a neighborhood that's known for having a heroin problem? So that's the idea of where we're heading, and we'll continue to search for new solutions." ❑

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