

Kelser Corporation is an IT Consulting Firm helping Businesses Secure their Data and Accelerate Objectives through Technology



Barry Kelly
Chief Executive Officer

Kelser Corporation
www.kelsercorp.com

Interview conducted by:
Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor
CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: *Barry, would you tell us about Kelser Corporation?*

Barry: Kelser Corporation is an IT consulting firm that helps businesses secure their data and accelerate their objectives through technology. Kelser was established in 1981 and has evolved along with technology over the past nearly four decades. Our company is now very services focused, taking on the overall IT for small to mid-sized organizations and supporting the IT staff at Fortune 500 companies. Because of how complicated IT has become, we step in to make the end-user experience simpler and better.

Our approach is to help companies form an IT strategy for today, as well as the future, that is part of the fabric of the business, versus just transactional. We currently have forty people, nearly half of whom have been here more than twenty years. I think that, more than anything, shows that this is a great place to work, and that we are in an exciting field. The IT business changes every day, and people that you work with are busy, but also thoughtful and intelligent. Surprisingly, there is a lot of human interaction in our approach to IT, and that's something I think both our employees and clients enjoy.

CEOCFO: *Are most companies understanding today the need for outsourcing IT or is it still not really where it should be?*

Barry: It is dramatically changing. In the last year alone, there has been a dramatic jump. Our managed services portfolio has more than doubled in the past year or so. For us, it's about finding the right fit with a client that can truly become a partner. Typically, the sweet spot for us is companies with about twenty to two hundred employees that are willing to work closely with an IT partner to tackle their business objectives and challenges.

We may engage in a small project with a new client to begin with, but the overall goal is to become part of the fabric of the organization and be their IT infrastructure and security experts. While some of our clients outsource 100% of their IT to our team, many maintain some aspect of IT in-house. Either way, our role is strategic, collaborating with the client to implement the technology that makes the most sense for them, stay ahead of cyber threats, and plan for technological and business shifts on the horizon.

The best example of this is our vCIO offering. Our "virtual" executives are seasoned IT pros who are embedded in our clients at the highest level with a C-suite role. They guide the company in addressing immediate technology needs and opportunities, as well as forming a two-year road map. This often includes prioritizing which vulnerabilities or performance problems to address first and which to look at again further down the road.

CEOCFO: *How do you work with a company to understand what they need versus what they think they need?*

Barry: We have an advantage here because we launched our managed services out of a long-running and successful value-added reselling business. Many of our clients have been with us for decades, so we have built a great deal of trust. Even before we launched our managed services offerings, we were accustomed to helping our clients navigate their

needs in the present and short-term. The key shift for us was changing the scope of our conversations so that they are more focused on business objectives versus speeds and feeds and hardware and all that. When clients let us in to the big picture of their business—where they are trying to go and why—we're able to make connections about how technology can get them there.

CEOCFO: *Is there a particular type of business you serve?*

Barry: We work with companies in a wide variety of industries. Here in Connecticut, we are located in a manufacturing hub, especially for defense. When the manufacturing industry recently introduced strict cybersecurity guidelines with NIST 800-171, we've been a leader in helping manufacturers become compliant. Hartford is also the insurance capital of the world, and several of the insurance companies who form the Hartford skyline are our long-term clients. In addition, we support industries that are highly targeted by hackers such as financial services, banking, and healthcare, and industries that technology is rapidly reshaping, such as construction and law. We work with municipalities, schools, nonprofits, and even consumer businesses such as auto dealerships. For over 20 years, we have provided the IT for the Travelers Championship PGA TOUR event. Our clients truly are a wide range of organizations because technology is so essential to every industry these days.

CEOCFO: *What are some of the misconceptions you need to deal with when you are working with a business, particularly one you are taking on as a new client?*

Barry: The biggest misconception is that hardware has to be a massive expense and that having the right hardware solves all IT problems. A key feature of our managed services offerings is to spread out the cost of IT to make it predictable and stable. We also help clients see that no individual piece of hardware will revolutionize their IT—it's all about the strategy, how the pieces interact, and the security of the infrastructure.

“When clients let us in to the big picture of their business—where they are trying to go and why—we're able to make connections about how technology can get them there.”- Barry Kelly

CEOCFO: *Speaking of security, how do you help your clients pay enough attention to security?*

Barry: Most successful cyberattacks involve a human element—an employee who unwittingly lets a hacker into the system. For that reason, education and awareness for employees is the most important component of a cybersecurity strategy. One way we get a baseline for how security savvy the employees of a new client are is by simulating a phishing attack. We create and send out a phishing email—with permission from the company leaders, of course—that looks pretty realistic, but has a few subtle ways of knowing that it's a fake. It never ceases to amaze me that no matter how sophisticated the company is when we do this, you have people at all levels, including executives in the organization, biting on these things. This type of white hat phishing attempt is often part of our cybersecurity assessment, and it's a good convincer that there are serious vulnerabilities in the company that even low-level hackers could exploit.

Once the client's eyes are opened to how easily they can be tricked, we begin more advanced cybersecurity training so that they can recognize all the pit falls. We have a system that is an on-going training every month, and our own team, including me, participates in it as well. I get three or four classes sent to me per month, and they are usually only five to twelve minutes long. They are exercises to familiarize me with new techniques that hackers are using, or that I can use to stay secure. There's a test at the end that you have to take. This approach keeps cybersecurity fresh in your mind so that when you get an email, you automatically look at things differently, no matter who it comes from, whether internal or external. Cybersecurity technology is advancing every day, with sophisticated filters, defenses, and AI. But hackers' technology is advancing too, and the most and the single best way to stop breaches is to know what to look for.

CEOCFO: *Are there services you want to add to the mix?*

Barry: Since technology is always changing, there's always something new we're looking at adding or improving in our managed services. One area that's advancing quickly right now for us is mobile device management. We're now able to outsource complete management of mobile devices, just like we do for computers and laptops so that employees have a ready, working, pre-configured mobile at all times without ever doing any setup or troubleshooting themselves.

CEOCFO: *Would you tell us about the Kelsner Foundation?*

Barry: Supporting nonprofits is such an essential part of the Kelsner culture that we created our own foundation to channel these efforts. By the end of this year, the Kelsner Foundation will have raised over \$1 million for charities, as well as countless man-hours, food and clothing donations.

Our flagship event is the Kelser Charity Challenge golf tournament, which over 23 years, has raised more than \$300,000 for nonprofits. The past three years, our charity has been the Hospital for Special Care's Center for Cognitive Health. The Hospital for Special Care in New Britain, Connecticut, is one of the largest long-term, acute care hospitals in the US and one of only two in the nation serving both adults and children. They're a client of ours, and we've seen firsthand the incredible work they do with patients who can't get the comprehensive care they need anywhere else.

For a relatively small staff, a high number of people at Kelser have a loved one who has been affected by Alzheimer's Disease. In fact, my brother Bruce, who founded Kelser, who built it with me and who I bought it from in 2010, is living with Alzheimer's. I was talking to the CIO at Hospital for Special Care about this over lunch, and he said that the hospital was considering launching a program for memory disorders. Long story short, we became their partner in creating the Center for Cognitive Health. To date, we've raised over \$70,000 for the center, which brings together a multi-disciplinary team of neuropsychologists, rehabilitation psychologists, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists who work together to identify and assess a patient and their cognitive functioning, and begin to address and delay some of the symptoms of dementia and Alzheimer's to help people function at home as independently as possible for as long as possible. It's an absolutely unbelievable program, and something I deeply wish my sister in law and I had had access to when my brother was first diagnosed.

Once the Kelser Charity Challenge became affiliated with a charity that had such a personal connection to so much of the Kelser team, it took on a new energy. Supporting this unique program at a small nonprofit hospital in our local area gives us the opportunity to see where the money raised makes a difference. We set a fundraising record for the Charity Challenge in both 2018 and 2019 because of the enthusiasm for this cause.

In addition to the Charity Challenge, Kelser is involved in a number of charitable activities throughout the year, most of which are suggested by our team or our partners. In 2019 we added a new event—the Penguin Plunge to support Special Olympics. The Kelser team was the top fundraiser at our local plunge in our first year, and we're looking forward to this event in 2020.

CEOCFO: Why choose Kelser Corporation?

Barry: Kelser is part of something really special here in Southern New England. It's a way of doing business that puts people and the community first. We recognize it in our clients and partners and they recognize it in us. Working here is not just a job. It's about building something bigger. Our high level of customer satisfaction reflects this approach. We have a pretty amazing customer retention—we rarely lose them. I am not saying it does not happen, but I think our philosophy of being out for more than ourselves is what helps us build these relationships that last decades, and why we have survived and thrived in a volatile industry for almost 40 years.

