



AI & SKILLS PART 2 – SECOND WAVE OF GROWTH

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Host:

Ellen Bencard, Accenture, UKI Local Eminence Lead, Walk in the Cloud Host

Speakers:

Tom White, Accenture Technology UKIA, Managing Director, Next Gen Engineering, Head of Growth & Strategy

Tom White Bio:

Tom is a Managing Director in the Next Gen Engineering practice, specialising in building innovative digital products and services for clients in all industries. His interests and experience span digital transformation, product and platform engineering and technology strategy.

Intro: Walk in the Cloud.

Ellen: Birmingham led the way in the world's first big industrial revolution. What does the modern city have to teach us in the current one? I'm Ellen Bencard, host of Walk in the Cloud, and that's what I was exploring on stage at Birmingham Tech Week with my guest Tom White. Let's jump right into the second part of the conversation that we started last episode. I want to move on to this proverbial elephant in the room, which is sustainability. So, all of that cool stuff in Tom's visionary slide. Take computing power, that is adding to the problem of climate on the slide before. What do we do about

being an industry that is fueling all that carbon?

Tom: .

Ellen: Solve the problems of the world, Tom.

Tom: I'm a big optimist. I think we need to start by picking up from just recognising that I think tech is the answer here. I think we can engineer our way out to lots of the challenges that we face as a species. I think there's a big question mark about should we be starting that now? Or five years ago, or 10 years ago? But that's not for me. So, when I think about the tech industry in particular, I think there's three things I'd like to leave you with today. I think there's collaboration. I think there's investment and I think there's change. So, across what we heard before we came up on stage, you think about collaboration. We talked about the smart road networks – that's using 5G, that's using IoT (Internet of Things), devices to monitor traffic around the West Midlands, first place in the UK to do it. When I think about investment, I would think about the Energy Park – the collaboration between the energy sector between academia, Birmingham University. But I think what your question was really getting to is change and what do we as technologists need to do? And I use myself as an example; I spend a lot of time building software, architecting applications, and the sorts of questions that we ask ourselves



when we do that are, how do we go faster? How do we get more done? And how do we how do we break less as we go, right? How do we deliver a quality product? In the time that I've been in industry; how do we make this efficient? Wasn't a question. We've grown up in a world where we demand to have unlimited elastic compute. So, the concept of saying how do we make this greener? Can we do it with less? Is there a more efficient way to do this? Those are behaviour changes that need to come in now. Going back to the optimist part of me, the technology is there to do that. I know many of my colleagues have developed tools that will scan applications as they're progressing through CI/CD pipelines, and they will flag to you where you've got opportunities to create greener efficiencies in your applications. But the real challenge there is the behaviour change that that's going to take. So, it's being introduced in universities. It's a feature in our school of Tech Futures course, but maybe that's an ask to all of you is when you go back to your day jobs and you're either involved personally or you're working with your colleagues who are building software or provisioning infrastructure, ask if there's a more efficient and greener way to do it. If everybody does that inch by inch, we'll make we'll make progress.

Ellen: I want to end this by asking for some free Accenture advice. Take yourself to your client boardrooms. The advice you're giving... What do you put on the priority list in the next year? Let's start from a corporate perspective and then I'm going to ask you about the individual. But you're talking to a client... What's on the corporate to-do list?

Tom: I think organisations of all size need to have a healthy level of concern for what happens when their competition get to a true advantage from AI. I don't think it's something you need to be scared about because they'll be having exactly the same challenges as you will. So, my answer to that question is what is your strategy to digitise the core of your business? What do your systems of record look like today?

What do they need to look like tomorrow? What does your data estate look like today? What does it need to look like tomorrow? Then what are the steps that you need to take to get there? I think there is a risk of being distracted by some of the things that are shinier and newer in the AI space but are well thought through holistic strategy around AI is going to involve so much more than experimenting with the chat bot, for example. So, that would be my message to corporates is to think about what is your strategy for building that digital core.

Ellen: And for an individual you already talked about efficiency but give me one more thing as our clock winds down.

Tom: We talked a lot about skills. I think the options that we have to learn have changed so much over the last three to four years. We all think the traditional route of going to university, doing a three- or four-year degree, learning on the job, yes, but that's kind of it. That would, for many people, be the end of formal or sort of structured learning. Well, look at what we have today. We have degree apprentices, we have things like the School of Tech Futures. We have things like the partnership that Accenture and other organisations have with Generation where we take people who are out of work and upskill them in data skills and then place them into an organisation. You have universities like University of Birmingham, for example, will offer six-week short courses to get you to a really strong level of understanding in new topics around innovation, Med tech, et cetera. So, there's so much opportunity to go out there and learn. And partners – tech software vendors, I think do a brilliant job of making certifications and training accessible. And the best thing about it all? Most of it's free. The only investment that you need to make in it is your time. So, if I had to give an individual one piece of advice, it would be to take Tom's 1% of your time spent thinking about the future, I'd recommend that you do the same on learning something new.

Ellen: Fabulous. Thank you.



That was a few weeks ago and after a great day mixing and mingling with all kinds of fascinating people, Tom and I rushed back to our day jobs and we haven't had a chance to talk to each other since to reflect on the event. Tom, I was blown away by the youthful energy and the focus all day on creativity and entrepreneurialism. I know we're always whacking the pfe of silicon in front of locations in the UK to make them seem cool and techie, but this honestly was the closest to the vibe of Northern California of anything I've experienced in this country. What did you think? What impressed you about that day and why?

Tom: I think I'd echo the Silicon Valley esque vibe, but it also had a unique sense of the West Mids heritage. I think that was one of the things that really stuck with me. I think everything from the venue location down to the focus on the future of manufacturing and the green industrial revolution, it's clearly an event which has thought about where the region has come from as well as where it's going, and I think that theme ran throughout the presentations and the organisers did a great job in putting that together.

Ellen: Yeah, that's a great point. So, there was really a feel of authenticity there rather than trying to copy somebody else.

Tom: I think so. I left the day with the impression that it was an event that was pitched at having global scale and impact. That was clear through the ambition and the nature of the companies that were representative from large multinationals who've relocated to the regions, right down to innovative startups but equally the size and scale of the event, meant that it was small enough, in a good way, to really build meaningful connections with people and speak to a large number of people on the day. I really think they got that balance right between the ambition of the impact and scale, but also the size and intimacy of the event.

Ellen: Yeah, so that left us both with an

incredible amount of optimism for that part of the country. What about others? And I know you move around the country a lot in your work. Are you seeing similar things elsewhere?

Tom: Yes, in a word. They're all very different. So, I've been involved in similar events in Bristol, in Manchester. They all have their own theme. I think there's an overarching story here in terms of the divestment out of London, all of the regions have a very different demographic in terms of the attendees, the presenters. You know the nature of the businesses who were represented, I have to say maybe with some bias that I think Birmingham Tech Week does it biggest and does it best. I mean the fact that it's a week long event and each day is so intense, there's so much happening compacted into a small time frame and a reasonably small footprint of the city itself. I think they've certainly set the bar very high, but you know equally I think Manchester Tech Week, Bristol Tech Week, these are fantastic events as well.

Ellen: And we need to remind our listeners that you are a local boy, so we're going to forgive you for your prejudice there. What part do you think IT plays? IT being a very old word, digital, AI, the whole world that we operate in. What role does that play in levelling up the country?

Tom: A reflections on that. The first one is and I had this conversation with my wife just yesterday. It's my daughter's birthday today and we were discussing what type of role might she go into, and it's easy to fall into the trap of just describing what's familiar to us and our context and the environment that we've grown up in. I think the reality is you'll go into a job that probably doesn't exist today and it's the types of industry that were the focus of Birmingham Tech Week, particularly around the green Industrial Revolution, battery technology, next generation tech and manufacturing. This is generating at an unprecedented speed and scale, new areas of investment, new industry and new jobs that the next generation will go into. So, when I reflect on the week, the



organisations who presented, the people that we both had the opportunity to spend some time with, I can't help but bring it back to me in my home life and my family and think about what does that mean for opportunities for the next generation. I think that's massively exciting. So, to answer your question, what does it mean for digital transformation? I think a huge amount of optimism, but also we shouldn't try to project our understanding into the future and fill in the gaps. Technology will do that for us. We just have to be there and be ready with the skills to take advantage of those opportunities when they present themselves.

Ellen: Sounds good. Are there any lessons we want to leave for people based in London about these areas of tech surge out in the country?

Tom: I think be open minded and don't get left behind. I think there's a very clear trend that's been happening for certainly the past three to five years of major corporations divesting their technology campuses outside of London. But think about the lag it takes for that to have a true impact on the region. It takes time to mobilise the hiring campaigns for people to put down roots for those initial apprentices and graduates brought into those organisations to move into managerial or leadership positions. And I sensed we're really on the cusp of that sort of second wave of growth being driven by those early adopters and pioneering companies who moved out slightly earlier. So, it's a trend that's here to stay and I think we need to stop thinking about the UK economy and London being the centre, particularly for tech. It's not the case anymore. For example, we have 7 campuses distributed around the UK and I know that's true for many of the companies that we compete with and our clients alike. So, Birmingham's the second biggest city in the UK. If we're having this conversation in 10 years, who knows, maybe it'll be the tech centre of the UK.

Ellen: Well, one country, lots of energy. Sounds like good news for everybody.
Listeners, if Tom's future gazing into the world of

technology is your thing, I have an even bigger crystal ball for you to gaze into from early January 2024, you can download Accenture's Tech Vision 24 report and dive deep into all the excitement and anxiety, potential and concerns that our experts around the world see on the horizon. It's an annual blockbuster. Don't miss it.

Outro: Walk in the Cloud

Copyright © 2024 Accenture
All rights reserved.

Accenture and its logo
are registered trademarks
of Accenture.