

Insider Tips To Make Your Business Run Faster, Easier and More Profitably

Lessons Learned. Goals Met.

The Future Is Bright.

We often hear that looking back does not matter. We disagree. Progress comes from reflection. When you take the time to review what worked and what did not, you create space for smarter decisions and stronger growth.

As we wrapped up the year, Shawn and I sat down and did just that. We looked closely at our wins, our challenges, and the lessons in between. It was time well spent. That conversation gave us clarity. We now know exactly where we want to go in 2026, and just as important, where we do not.

That kind of focus matters when you are growing a company and supporting clients who rely on you every day. Here are a few highlights from what we learned.

What the past year reinforced

- Communication is critical. When your IT team stays informed about goals, projects, and decisions, problems get solved faster. Your IT team understands how your business operates behind the scenes. Involving them early saves time, reduces risk, and lowers cost.

Smart risks drive growth. We took a few big chances this year, and they paid off.

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CST Group Inc.

This monthly publication is provided courtesy of Shawn & Lisa Brown, Owners.

OUR MISSION:

CST Group Inc. is a PROACTIVE technology management firm who's mission it to SECURE, PROTECT and MANAGE technology for Small to Medium Businesses like yours.

CYBERSECURITY BLIND SPOTS:

THE RISKS YOU DON'T SEE BUT HACKERS DO

Every business leader understands the importance of cybersecurity. Yet the biggest threats often aren't headline-grabbing breaches. They're the overlooked gaps hiding in plain sight. These blind spots may seem minor: a missed software update, an inactive account or an untested backup. But for hackers, they're open doors. Here are the most common gaps and how to close them before they become costly mistakes:

1. Unpatched systems

Every missed update is an invitation to attackers. Hackers track patch cycles and exploit known vulnerabilities.

Fix: Automate patch management and set alerts for lagging systems.

2. Shadow IT and rogue devices

Employees downloading unauthorized apps or connecting personal devices to your network can introduce malware that stays dormant until it's too late.

Fix: Enforce strict app and device policies. Regularly scan for unknown endpoints.

3. Over-permissive access

Too much access is dangerous. Hackers love accounts with excessive permissions.

Fix: Apply least privilege principles, mandate MFA and review permissions regularly.

4. Outdated security tools

Cyberthreats evolve daily. Old antivirus or intrusion detection tools can't keep up.

Fix: Audit your security stack and replace outdated tools before they fail you.

5. Orphaned accounts

Former employees' credentials often remain active, making them prime targets for attackers.

Fix: Automate offboarding to disable accounts immediately.

6. Misconfigured firewalls

A firewall is only as strong as its settings. Old or temporary rules create vulnerabilities.

Fix: Audit configurations, document changes and remove unnecessary permissions.

7. Untested backups

Backups aren't a safety net unless they work. Many businesses discover too late that theirs are corrupt or incomplete.

Fix: Test backups quarterly and store them securely in immutable storage.

8. Missing security monitoring

You can't protect what you can't see. Without centralized visibility, threats slip through unnoticed.

Fix: Invest in continuous monitoring or partner with an experienced IT provider.

9. Compliance gaps

Frameworks like GDPR or HIPAA aren't just paperwork. They're essential for strong security.

Fix: Conduct regular compliance reviews and maintain documentation.

Bottom line: Identifying blind spots is only the beginning. The real value lies in fixing them quickly. Start with these fixes and you'll strengthen your defenses where it matters most.

TECH TRENDS

YOUR BUSINESS SHOULD ACTUALLY PAY ATTENTION TO



Every year, tech publications release bold predictions about revolutionary trends that will “change everything.” Before long, you’re buried in buzzwords such as AI, blockchain and the metaverse, with little clarity on what truly drives revenue growth.

Here’s the truth: Most tech trends are hype designed to sell expensive consulting services, but buried in the noise are a few genuine shifts that will impact how you work. Let’s focus on what really matters. Here are three trends worth your attention and two you can safely ignore.

Trends worth your attention

1. AI built into tools you already use

AI is no longer a separate tool you have to learn. It’s being embedded directly into the software you already use every day. Your email program will draft responses. Your CRM will write follow-up messages. Your accounting software will automatically categorize expenses and flag any anomalies.

Why it matters: You’re not learning new tools; you’re just getting smarter versions of what you already use. Instead of asking “Should we adopt AI?” the question becomes “Should we turn on these features we’re already paying for?”

What to do: When your software offers AI features, try them for two weeks before deciding if they help. Many will be gimmicky, but some will save hours.

Time investment: Minimal. You’re already using these tools.

2. Automation without the headache

Building custom automations used to require hiring a developer or learning complex software. Now, new tools let you create workflows just by describing what you want in plain English.

Example: “When someone fills out my contact form, add them to my spreadsheet, send a welcome email and remind me to follow up in three days.” The AI figures out how to make it happen.

Why it matters: Automation moves from “We should do this but don’t have time” to “We can set this up in 20 minutes.”

What to do: Identify one repetitive task your team does weekly. Describe it to an automation tool and see if AI can build it for you.

Time investment: 20 to 30 minutes to set up your first automation.

3. Security regulations get real

Cybersecurity is shifting from best practice to legal requirement. States are passing data privacy laws. Insurance companies are requiring specific security measures. Enforcement is getting serious.

Why it matters: Not having basic protections

is becoming like not having business insurance. It’s a liability you can’t afford.

What to do: Cover three basics: multi-factor authentication on all accounts, regular data backups you can restore and written cybersecurity policies you follow.

Time investment: Two to three hours to set up properly.

Trends you can safely ignore

1. The metaverse for business

Virtual reality meetings have been “the next big thing” for a decade. Headsets are still expensive and uncomfortable. Unless you’re in architecture or design, skip it.

What to do: Nothing. If VR becomes useful for mainstream business, you’ll know because competitors will use it successfully.

2. Accepting crypto payments

Crypto sounds cutting edge, but it adds tax complexity, volatility and higher fees. Unless customers actively request it, stick to cards and ACH transfers.

What to do: If someone asks, politely say no. Reconsider only if multiple customers request it organically.

Focus on trends that save time, reduce risk and improve efficiency. Ignore the hype and invest where it truly benefits your business.

THE HIDDEN COST OF IGNORING TECH HEALTH

Your business runs on technology, but when was the last time you checked its health?

IT maintenance often gets ignored until something breaks. The reality is that neglecting your tech environment doesn't just invite risk. It can quietly drain resources, reduce efficiency and erode trust over time. Regular IT health checks are as important as financial audits or employee reviews. They ensure your systems perform at their best and help you stay ready for the unexpected.

The high price of inaction

Neglecting the health of your technology ecosystem isn't a small oversight; it's a risk multiplier. When systems are left unchecked, small technical issues can grow into major disruptions. The longer these problems go unnoticed, the more expensive and complex they become to fix. Here are some of the hidden costs your organization could face when IT issues go unaddressed:

Financial costs

Downtime and lost revenue: Unidentified vulnerabilities or outdated infrastructure can lead to system outages, costing thousands per hour in lost productivity and sales. For businesses that rely on real-time transactions or customer-facing platforms, even a short outage can have a major impact. In competitive markets, downtime doesn't just halt work. It can also drive customers toward faster, more reliable competitors.



Ransomware and breach costs: Blind spots in your IT environment often become entry points for cyberattacks. The average cost of a data breach is now in the millions, and ransomware demands can cripple operations for days or even weeks. Beyond the immediate financial hit, there's the long-term cost of rebuilding systems, restoring data and regaining trust.

Compliance penalties: Missing controls, outdated policies or incomplete documentation can result in fines for noncompliance with HIPAA, GDPR or other regulations. These penalties can be severe and often come with a loss of credibility that affects partnerships and customer relationships.

Recovery and remediation expenses: Emergency fixes, forensic investigations and public relations damage control are far more expensive than proactive maintenance. A single breach can lead to legal fees, customer notifications, compensation claims and costly settlements. The more reactive your approach, the greater the long-term financial strain.

Security risks

Data loss or theft: Unsecured endpoints, outdated software or misconfigured access controls can expose sensitive data. Once data is compromised, recovery is difficult and customer confidence can take years to rebuild.

Unauthorized access: Orphaned accounts or unmonitored devices are often exploited by

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SHINY NEW GADGET OF THE MONTH

OIKKEI AI Wireless Mouse

Meet the ultimate multitasker: a wireless mouse that doubles as an AI-powered audio recorder. Perfect for remote meetings, this device captures conversations accurately while you navigate your screen—no extra gadgets needed.

Streamline note-taking, improve collaboration and keep your workflow efficient. If you're looking for a simple way to save time and stay organized, this innovative tool is a game-changer for busy business leaders.



“CST Group Inc. was honored to be nominated for the 2025 MSP Titans of the Industry Awards on December 10th at the Beverly Hilton. While we did not take home the award, the recognition reflects our team's hard work and commitment to excellence.”

FREE REPORT

What Every Small-Business Owner Must Know About Protecting and Preserving Their Company's Critical Data and Computer Systems

This report will outline in plain, nontechnical language the common mistakes that many small-business owners make with their computer networks that cost them thousands in lost sales, productivity and computer repair bills. By the end of the report, you'll have an easy, proven way to reduce or completely eliminate the financial expense and frustration caused by these oversights.

Download your FREE copy today at:
www.cstsupport.com/protect
or call our office at 518-483-4100.



CARTOON OF THE MONTH



"The look you get when you say, 'Let's circle back.'"

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attackers or insider threats. These accounts can remain active for months before being discovered, creating an easy path for exploitation.

Malware propagation: A single unpatched system can become a launchpad for malware spreading across your network. One infected device can compromise your entire environment, interrupting operations and exposing confidential data across departments.

Operational and strategic impact

Reduced performance: Inefficient systems and outdated hardware slow down teams, create workflow bottlenecks and frustrate users. When technology becomes an obstacle rather than an enabler, productivity drops, morale suffers and business momentum stalls.

Missed opportunities: When you don't really know what's going on in your IT setup, planning ahead becomes a guessing game. Without accurate insights, it's difficult to forecast growth, plan digital transformation or

leverage new technologies effectively. Businesses that fail to modernize risk falling behind competitors that are faster, smarter and more agile.

Poor decision-making: When leadership operates without clear data about IT performance, decisions become reactive instead of strategic. This can lead to wasted investments, misaligned priorities and overlooked risks that could have been prevented with better visibility.

Reputational damage

Loss of client trust: A breach or prolonged outage can quickly erode years of goodwill. Clients expect reliability, privacy and accountability. Failing to deliver on those expectations can drive them to competitors who appear more secure and dependable.

Brand impact: Public incidents tied to IT failures can damage your brand's credibility and market position. Negative headlines and social media backlash can linger long after the issue is

resolved, overshadowing your successes and shaking customer confidence.

Ignoring your tech health doesn't just risk downtime. It weakens your entire foundation. Regular IT assessments help identify vulnerabilities before they escalate, optimize performance and ensure compliance. Think of it as preventive care for your business. A little attention today can protect your reputation, save money and keep your organization healthy in the long run.

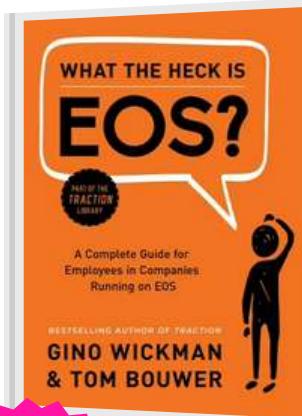




Passionate NOT Pushy

WITH LISA BROWN

Passionate Not Pushy. A Different Kind of Business Conversation.



<BOOK>
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WHAT I'M READING....

WHAT THE HECK IS EOS? BY GINO WICKMAN & TOM BOWER

This book is not only the foundation of how CST operates but a mandatory read for ALL staff. It explains how the Entrepreneurial Operating System brings clarity, accountability, and structure to organizations by aligning vision, people, and execution around simple, repeatable processes.

If you are looking to enhance your business, align goals and get everyone working together, this is a must read (and implement)!

Have you ever had your team, friends, or advisors encourage you to try something you were convinced would never work? That was exactly how the Passionate Not Pushy podcast began.

When the idea was first shared with me, I was skeptical. I did not believe people would be interested in my perspective or in honest conversations with other business owners, CEOs, and entrepreneurs. I was wrong. Sometimes the ideas that feel uncomfortable are the ones that matter most.

We launched Passionate Not Pushy in March 2025, and the response has been stronger than I ever expected. The podcast is growing quickly because it fills a real gap. These are not loud, sales-driven interviews. They are real conversations with people who care deeply about their work, their teams, and the impact they make.

Each episode explores what it means to lead with passion without leading with ego. We talk about lessons learned the hard way, decisions that changed careers, and moments when conviction mattered more than volume. Guests share what worked, what failed, and what they would do differently if given the chance.

What has surprised me most is how much I continue to learn from these conversations. Every guest brings a new perspective, a fresh insight, or a reminder that leadership does not have to look a certain way to be effective. Passion does not require pressure. Confidence does not require noise.

If you are a business owner, leader, or professional who wants thoughtful conversations instead of hype, this podcast is for you. If you believe that purpose and performance can coexist, you will find value here.

As we start a new year, I invite you to listen, reflect, and join the conversation. Your support truly means a great deal.

Please take a moment to subscribe to the Passionate Not Pushy podcast on Spotify. New episodes are released regularly, and I would love to have you along for the journey. Here's to starting the year with intention, curiosity, and meaningful conversations.

Subscribe Here





“Being seen isn’t a marketing tactic—it’s a leadership choice.”

On this episode of *Passionate Not Pushy*, I sit down with Heather Gill, founder of Snapshots Photo Booth, to talk about building a six-figure brand by trusting your gut, creating space for others, and leading with both purpose and profit.

This conversation will remind you that you don’t have to be the loudest voice in the room to make the biggest impact.

🎧 Episode drops 1/27/26



If you’ve ever felt called to share the lessons you’ve learned along the way—the wins, the missteps, and the moments that shaped your leadership—we’d love to have that conversation with you.

Passionate Not Pushy is not an interview; it’s a conversation among friends where we exchange real-life lessons, honest insights, and authentic perspectives on leadership and growth. If you’re interested in being a guest on the podcast, call us 518-481-4100 or email tasha@cstsupport.com.

Sometimes the most powerful impact comes from simply showing up and sharing your story.



Educate Your Team

Empowering Your Team. Protecting Your Business

Cyber threats are more prevalent than ever, and most successful attacks start with a simple mistake. Help protect your business by empowering your team with CST Group’s Security Awareness Training. Our sessions are easy to schedule, tailored to your business, and designed to teach employees how to recognize and respond to today’s most common cyber threats. Book your training now to strengthen your defenses and start the new year with confidence

Please contact Jessica to schedule.

Phone: 518-483-4100

Jessica@cstsupport.com

Risk Assessment?

Your Digital Security Should Be A Non-Negotiable!



Annual and quarterly risk assessments are not optional for compliance focused industries. They are required to stay aligned with regulatory standards, protect sensitive data and reduce liability. Even if your business is not bound by compliance rules, regular risk assessments are one of the most effective ways to understand your exposure to a cyber-attack. They identify gaps, measure vulnerabilities and give you a clear roadmap to strengthen your security posture before an incident occurs. Every business benefits from knowing its true level of risk.

If you are looking for an Annual or Quarterly Risk Assessment, CST offers a 3rd party perspective to your security posture. To learn more, call 518-483-4100 and ask for Lisa.

- We created a DBA for IT for Local Government...to better showcase our specialty. We also made the decision to focus on the right-fit clients using principles from The Pumpkin Plan by Mike Michalowicz. That focus strengthened our business and improved service quality.
- Visibility matters. We attended more than a dozen events across New York State and Florida, positioning CST as a trusted IT partner. Being nominated as MSP Titans of the Industry reinforced what our clients already know. Strong service builds strong reputation.

Now it is time to kick off the first quarter with intention and momentum.

What to expect in the coming year

- AI will impact every organization. As AI becomes part of daily operations, security becomes even more important. Protecting data, systems, and users must evolve alongside new technology.

Employees remain a major security factor. Technology alone is not enough. Education

- and awareness play a major role in reducing risk. Well-informed teams make better decisions.
- Expanded training opportunities. Our Training Division is officially in full swing. We now offer courses focused on AI, cybersecurity, Microsoft Office tools, and more. Contact Jessica at jessica@cstsupport.com or 518-483-4100 for full details on training options and pricing.
- Continued growth in VoIP services. Our VoIP division, led by Michelle, had an outstanding first full year. With happy clients and proven results, 2026 is shaping up to be even stronger. If you need better phone service, email Michelle at michelle@cstsupport.com to schedule a free demo or give her a call at 518-483-4100.
- Risk assessments are becoming essential. Third-party risk assessments are quickly moving from best practice to requirement. If you need an independent review of your cybersecurity and network posture, call us at 877-954-4100.

As we start this new year, we want to thank you for your trust, your partnership, and your support. Whether you have been with us for years or are just getting to know CST, we are committed to helping you work smarter, stay secure, and grow with confidence.

Here is to a strong start, a clear path forward, and a successful year ahead.

Lisa



6 New Year's Tech Resolutions That Will Actually Move the Needle in

Lock Down MFA Everywhere

If it has a login, it needs MFA – period. One small change can stop over 90% of the attacks I see land on desks every day.

Audit Your Tech Stack for Waste

You're likely paying for tools you aren't using or that overlap. Cut the clutter, cut the costs, and tighten your operational focus.

Upgrade Every Outdated Device

Old hardware is slowing your team down and opening the door to vulnerabilities. 2026 is the year of no more Band-Aids.

Back Up Like Your Future Depends On It

Because it does. Automate backups, verify them monthly, and ensure you're ready for ransomware or disaster recovery at any moment.

Train Your Team – Monthly

Cybersecurity isn't a one-time event. Build a culture of awareness with short, consistent training that keeps staff alert and empowered.

Bring in a Strategic IT Partner

Stop reacting. Start leading with a proactive roadmap, measurable outcomes, and an IT team that treats your mission like their own.

SHARE A REFERRAL - EARN A REWARD!



Do you know an organization that needs reliable IT support?

You can help them stay compliant, safeguard their systems and earn rewards at the same time. Our referral program makes it simple. When you introduce us to a business or municipality facing technology challenges, security gaps or compliance concerns, we will provide a full assessment and a clear path to improvement.

HERE'S HOW:

- \$50: Introduce CST Group to a qualified colleague who completes their initial assessment—whether they become a client or not.
- \$500: If your referral becomes a managed IT client, enjoy this bonus at the end of their first month.

SO, YOU MIGHT BE
WONDERING – WHO MAKES
AN IDEAL REFERRAL?

- Any business with 10 or more computers
- Needs help with its network, backup, compliancy, support, and security
- Wants 24x7x365 peace of mind

Full Details Here: <https://www.cstsupport.com/about-us/referral-program/> or call us at 1-877-954-4100

THE PHONE SYSTEM BUILT FOR TODAY'S WORK.

Looking for a Better Phone System?

Or maybe your current phones are driving you crazy?

Want more flexibility to take calls from anywhere?

Stay connected whether you're at your desk, on the road, or working from home.

Our easy-to-use phone system lets you:

- Make and receive calls from your computer, mobile phone, or web browser.
- See who is available, on a call, or away.
- Sync your contacts so everything stays up to date.
- Use multiple devices for one user - so your calls follow you wherever you go!

Simple. Flexible. Reliable.

• A phone system that works- wherever you do.

Contact Michelle at 877-954-4100

Explore What's Possible

— Scan to Schedule a Demo!

