CST TECHNOLOGY TIMES

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

Tech Talk With Lisa

Where is your data?

Pause for a minute and answer honestly.

- Do you know where it lives?
- Is it backed up?
- Is it only in the cloud?
- If it is in the cloud, is it still backed up?

I asked myself these questions on a Sunday morning while preparing for a speaking engagement in New York City. I had a slide deck and notes that I absolutely needed for Monday's presentation. Before leaving, I wanted to test everything one more time.

I turned on my laptop. It was not plugged in. I decided to let it run on battery for a bit. My thinking was simple. If it works fine on battery now, I will plug it in at the hotel and be ready to go.

The laptop started normally. I reached my desktop. Everything looked good. I stepped away to grab coffee. When I came back, I saw a critical battery warning. The laptop was about to shut down. I rushed to plug it in, but I did not make it in time. It powered off. No big deal, right? Wrong.

I plugged it in and powered it back on. Instead of loading Windows, I received an error. The system would not boot. No matter what I tried, it would not load. I called Shawn, who was in Florida at the time, and walked through every troubleshooting step we could think of. I have been solving technology problems for over two decades. I know the process. I know the steps. I tried them all.

Nothing worked. Here is what likely happened. When I powered on the laptop, it connected to my home WiFi and began installing Microsoft updates. While those updates were running, the battery died. The system shut down mid install. That interruption corrupted the operating system.

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.

WHEN AN I.T. RELATIONSHIP STARTS TO FEEL LIKE A BAD DATE

Most bad dates don't begin badly. They start with quick replies. Clear plans. A sense that someone is paying attention. You leave thinking things are handled.

Business technology relationships often begin the same way. At first, support is responsive. Systems are set up. Problems get fixed. There's relief in knowing someone is "on it."

Technology fades into the background where it belongs.

Then your business grows. More tools are added. Your team gets busier. Security concerns grow. What once felt simple now feels complicated.

The Honeymoon Phase Ends

Replies take longer. Issues that were supposedly resolved return. You hear phrases like "we'll look into it" more often than you'd like.

Before you know it, you're adapting your business to someone else's bad behavior.

You call. You leave a message. Maybe you send an email. Then you wait for hours. Sometimes days.

Meanwhile, your team is stuck. You're paying employees who can't do their jobs because IT "support" is missing in action.

That's not support. That's a bad date who says, "I'm on my way" and never shows up.

Healthy tech relationships don't leave you hanging. Problems get acknowledged, triaged and fixed fast. Better yet, many of them never happen because someone is watching your systems before they melt down.

Why Tech Relationships Go Bad

Most small-business tech relationships fail for the same reason most relationships fail: No one is maintaining the relationship.

Tech often runs on a reactive model: Something breaks, you call, they patch it, everyone ignores it again, repeat. That's like talking to your spouse only during fights.

You're technically communicating, but you're not building anything stable.

Meanwhile, your business keeps growing, so the IT relationship that worked with five people and one shared drive doesn't survive with 15 people with more data and more apps being targeted by smarter criminals.

What a Healthy Tech Relationship Feels Like

A good tech relationship isn't exciting. It doesn't create drama. It feels calm.

A good IT partner doesn't just fix problems. They prevent problems. They monitor, patch and maintain quietly in the background so issues don't sneak up on you during payroll, tax prep or your biggest client deadline of the quarter.

Here's the real sign you're in a good tech relationship: You stop thinking about IT most days because it just works. Not trendy. Not magical. Reliable.

The Big Question

If your IT provider was a person you were dating, would you keep seeing them? Or would your friends say, "Seriously? You're still calling that guy?"

If you've normalized bad tech behavior, you're paying twice: in dollars and in stress. And neither one is necessary.

AI TOOLS ARE EVERYWHERE

HERE'S HOW TO USE THEM WITHOUT MAKING A MESS

You log back into work after a well-deserved break and your inbox is already full. Meetings are stacking up. The to-do list is longer than you remember. You're back to doing too much with too little time.

And now, on top of everything else, AI is everywhere.

Every app is pushing the same message: "Add AI." "Automate with AI." "Use AI or fall behind." Meanwhile, you're wondering where this actually helps your business and how to keep it from blowing up in your face.

Right now, AI is the new intern everyone hired without training. While interns can be amazing, they can also make big mistakes if nobody sets rules.

3 Time-Saving Ways to Use AI in Your Business

Here are three easy ways AI tools can save you time.

1. Inbox triage and first-draft replies

If your inbox feels overwhelming, AI can help reduce the noise. It can scan long email threads, surface what matters, draft solid first responses and flag messages that need attention. What it cannot do is understand customer nuance or decide what the actual reply should be. That workflow should remain simple: AI drafts. Humans approve.

2. Meeting notes that turn into action lists

Meetings are a tax on productivity.

The bigger problem isn't the meeting itself, it's what happens after it ends.

AI note tools can summarize conversations, highlight decisions, capture action items, assign owners and generate clean recaps. This reduces "wait, what did we decide?" moments and helps prevent tasks from slipping through the cracks.

3. Simple reporting and forecasting

Most business owners don't lack data, they lack the time to interpret it.

AI can summarize trends, flag anomalies, surface patterns in support tickets, and churn and turn raw numbers into plain English. Think of it as a sorting machine, not a crystal ball.

The Guardrails: How to Use AI Without Doing Something Dumb

This is where most businesses get burned. They treat AI like a search engine and accidentally feed it something sensitive.

Rule 1: *Never paste sensitive data into public AI tools*

Customer information, payroll or HR data, passwords, and internal financials do not belong in AI prompts. If you wouldn't want it to be public, DON'T share it with the AI tool.

Rule 2: *Control who can use what*

Shadow AI is exploding in small businesses. Employees sign up for random tools with corporate accounts because they want to be efficient. You need an approved tools list, clear guidance on acceptable data use and tighter permissions for sensitive roles.

Rule 3: *AI drafts. Humans decide.*

We said it before, but it's so important we can't emphasize it enough. Anything created by AI that goes out under your brand should be reviewed and approved by a human. No exceptions.

Rule 4: *Assume everything you type is being stored*

Public AI tools live on someone else's servers. Even if data is not being used today, it is still stored somewhere. Like the internet, assume data sent to an AI tool lives forever and act accordingly.

Rule 5: *When in doubt, don't paste*

If you're unsure, don't share until you ask. Make it so others feel comfortable asking.

What AI Done Right Actually Looks Like

Real businesses don't start with massive AI transformations. They pick one or two time-wasting processes, add AI with guardrails, measure the impact and expand slowly.

The businesses pulling ahead aren't chasing hype. They're experimenting safely.

Because the real question isn't whether or not your team is using AI, it's whether they're using it safely.

THE HIDDEN BOTTLENECK KILLING YOUR PRODUCTIVITY

(IT'S NOT YOUR PEOPLE)

LOADING...

If you're a business owner, you've had this exact thought: "Why does everything take longer than it should?"

It's not because your people are bad or because they don't care. It's because most processes have extra steps baked in that nobody asked for.

Those steps usually come from tech friction: tools that don't connect, networks that drag and access chaos that makes everyone wait.

Over time, that friction is the difference between "we're moving" and "we're stuck." Let's expose three hidden bottlenecks slowing businesses like yours down and how to fix them without a massive overhaul.

Bottleneck #1: Your Apps Don't Talk To Each Other

Translation: You're running a copy-paste business.

Sales enters a customer in your CRM. Operations re-enters the same information into a project tool. Billing re-enters it again into accounting. Someone emails a spreadsheet "just to be safe."

Nobody wants to do this. They do it because the tools they're using don't share data, so humans become the integration layer.

That creates duplicated work, dropped details, inconsistencies and delays that feel like people are working slowly but are really systems being inefficient.

The hidden cost adds up fast. If 10 people spend just a few minutes a day retyping or reconciling data, that's more than 26 hours a month lost to busy work. Multiply that by payroll, and you're burning money to keep tools from speaking to each other.

Bottleneck #2: Slow Or Unstable Networks

Translation: Death by a thousand loading screens.

This one is sneaky because it feels normal. Files take longer to open. Cloud apps lag. Calls glitch. People restart tools without thinking about it. Nobody complains about a few seconds here and there, but your business bleeds time in small cuts.

It also drains morale. Nothing kills momentum like staring at a loading bar while a customer waits. Network drag turns motivated employees into tired employees, even when they're trying hard.

Bottleneck #3: Approval and Access Chaos

Translation: Everyone is waiting on the one person with the password.

This is where productivity quietly dies.

- "Who has access to that folder?"
- "Can someone approve this?"
- "I need the login for this tool."
- "Only Steve can do that."
- "Steve is out today."

SHINY NEW GADGET OF THE MONTH

Solos AirGo A5 AI Smart Glasses

The Solos AirGo A5 AI Smart Glasses bring hands-free AI into your line of sight. With these smart glasses you can translate text on the fly and access contextual information while staying focused on the task in front of you. For busy business leaders, this means fewer interruptions and faster decisions. Instead of stopping to search, information comes to you in real time. It's a small shift that adds up to time savings over a busy week.

Risk Assessment?

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.

FREE DOWNLOAD

If You Are Considering Cloud Computing for Your Company, Read This First

If you are considering cloud computing or Microsoft 365 to save money and simplify IT, it is extremely important that you get and read this special report: **"5 Critical Facts Every Business Owner Must Know Before Moving Their Network To The Cloud."**

This report discusses in simple, nontechnical terms the pros and cons of cloud computing, data security and how to choose a cloud provider. Learn three little-known facts that most IT consultants don't know or won't tell you about cloud computing that could end up causing you MORE problems and costing you more money than you anticipated. **Even if you aren't ready to move to the cloud**, this report will give you the right information and questions to ask when the time comes.

INTRO TO CLOUD COMPUTING

"5 Critical Facts Every Business Owner Must Know Before Moving Their Network To The Cloud"

Discover What Most IT Consultants Don't Know Or Won't Tell You About Moving Your Company's Network To The Cloud

Get your FREE copy today: https://www.cstsupport.com/cloudreport

CARTOON OF THE MONTH

"Your results are impressive, but we're concerned you're not working with others enough."

Businesses normalize this because it just feels like how things work. In reality, it's a permissions system designed by accident.

When access is messy, work stalls and people create risky workarounds while the business becomes dependent on single points of failure.

The 10-Minute Bottleneck Diagnostic

To find your biggest friction points, ask your team three questions:

- "What is one thing you do every day that feels like a waste of time?"
- "Where do you get stuck waiting for something or someone?"
- "What tool or system makes your job harder than it needs to be?"

Don't prompt them. Just listen. You'll hear the same answers repeated by different people.

Finding the bottlenecks is easy, but fixing them is where most businesses stall.

Fixing the Bottlenecks

Once you see the friction, you can remove it. Apps that don't connect can usually be integrated, sometimes natively and sometimes through automation. When data flows automatically, manual work disappears.

Slow networks and Wi-Fi need to be audited and optimized. Sometimes the issue is outdated equipment. Sometimes it's configuration. Sometimes it's simply too many devices on too little bandwidth.

Access chaos requires structure. Document who has access to what. Set up onboarding so people have what they need on day one. Use a password manager instead of sharing credentials.

None of this is glamorous, it's infrastructure. Fix one bottleneck and the whole team moves faster.

How an IT Service Provider Removes the Drag

Most business owners know something is slowing them down. They just don't have time to diagnose it, research solutions and implement fixes while running the business.

A good IT service provider helps by integrating tools, stabilizing networks, setting clean access rules, automating handoffs and building systems that match how your business actually operates.

In short, productivity improves not because people changed but because the environment stopped working against them. If your team is busy but results are lagging, the bottleneck is rarely the people. It's the systems around them.

Ashley Utter

In this episode of the Passionate NOT Pushy Podcast, Lisa A. Brown sits down with Ashley Utter, owner of Greenscape Innovations, a family-owned landscaping and sod company serving Arcadia and Port Charlotte, Florida.
Ashley shares her journey into sole ownership, how she's grown a values-driven business rooted in family and integrity, and why leading with purpose—not pressure—creates sustainable success. A must-listen for women entrepreneurs and leaders who believe you don't have to push harder to grow—you just have to lead smarter.

Behind the Faces That Support Your Success

At CST Group Inc., technology is what we do, but people are who we are.
Behind every firewall monitored, every ticket resolved, every system protected, and every strategy built is a dedicated team that truly cares about your success. Our team photo represents more than smiling faces; it represents a group of professionals who show up every day with one shared mission: to make technology easier, safer, and more reliable for the organizations we serve.

We understand that when technology works well, it often goes unnoticed. But when something isn't working, it can feel overwhelming. That's where we come in. Our team prides itself on being responsive, approachable, and proactive—meeting you where you are and guiding you forward with clarity and confidence.

Whether you're a long-time client or newly onboarded, know this: you are never just a ticket number to us. You are a valued partner. Your questions, ideas, and feedback help us grow, improve, and serve you better.
We'd love to hear from you.

If you ever need assistance, have a suggestion, or want to share how we're doing, please reach out—call or email us anytime. And if you've had a positive experience, we would be honored if you'd consider leaving a Google review or sending us a testimonial. Your voice means the world to our team.
From all of us at CST Group—thank you for trusting us with your technology. We're here for you, today and always.

Passionate NOT Pushy

<BOOK>
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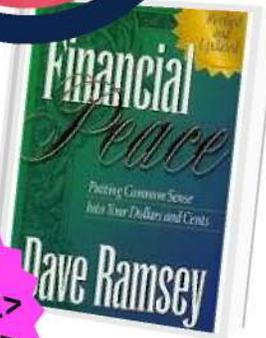
If you want a practical reset on your finances, Financial Peace is a strong place to start. Dave Ramsey breaks money down into simple, clear steps that anyone can follow. His "Baby Steps" focus on building a small emergency fund, paying off debt with focus and momentum, and then steadily building wealth.

What I appreciate most is the emphasis on behavior. This book is not about complicated formulas. It is about discipline, clarity, and making intentional decisions. If you are ready to take control of money instead of reacting to it, this is a straightforward and motivating guide.

I hope you enjoy!

I am writing this from my second airport in two days.

Two canceled flights. One delayed flight. I am still sitting in Burlington, Vermont, hoping this one actually takes off for Florida.

Travel reminds us that control is often an illusion. You can plan carefully. You can build in extra time. You can check the weather, confirm the reservation, arrive early. You can do everything right. Life can still change the schedule.

In moments like this, we have a choice.

We can let frustration take over. We can focus on what is not happening. We can replay the inconvenience in our minds. We can allow the disruption to define the experience.

Or we can pause.

We can accept that some variables sit outside our control. We can adjust.

We can use the unexpected space to think, reflect, reset, or rest. We can choose patience over panic.

Life works the same way.

Projects stall. Conversations shift. Opportunities get delayed. Decisions take longer than expected. Timing rarely aligns perfectly with our plans.

The question is not whether disruptions will happen. They will.

The question is how you respond.

Do you create unnecessary stress, or do you adapt with intention? Do you tighten your grip, or do you steady your mindset?

Patience is not passive. It is strength under pressure. It is the discipline to stay steady when circumstances are not. It is emotional control when outcomes feel uncertain.

Sometimes the delay is the lesson.

It forces you to slow down long enough to notice what you missed while rushing. It creates space to think more clearly. It tests your mindset more than your momentum. It reveals whether your confidence depends on perfect conditions or on something deeper.

Growth rarely happens when everything moves smoothly. It happens when plans shift and you choose to stay focused anyway. It happens when you respond with clarity instead of emotion.

Control is limited. Response is not.

And often, that makes all the difference.

So, the next time your schedule shifts or your plans unravel, pause before you react. Ask yourself what this moment requires from you. Not control. Not perfection. Just steadiness. Just perspective. Just the willingness to respond with intention instead of impulse.

That is where real strength lives.

As always, stay Passionate Not Pushy

Lisa

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Continued from Cover

I know better. I really do.

I was trying to be proactive. Instead, I created a problem. I typically use my laptop while it is plugged in. The battery never fully charges because of that habit. I ignored a basic rule.

Always ensure you have sufficient power before updates or critical work.

Within minutes, I went from feeling prepared to wondering:

- Where are my presentation files?
- Can I access them from another device?
- Do I have a recent backup?
- What is my workaround?

That stress was unnecessary. It was avoidable.

Now let me ask you again. Where is your data?

If your device failed today, what would you do? Many people say, "It's in the cloud, so I'm fine."

That is not a backup strategy.

Cloud platforms can experience outages. Accounts can be compromised. Files can be deleted or overwritten. Ransomware can encrypt synced folders. If your cloud account is your only copy, you are exposed.

Here is what you should do right now.

- Identify every place your data lives. Laptops, desktops, servers, cloud platforms, external drives.
- Confirm you have a backup that is separate from the original location.
- Make sure backups run automatically, not manually.
- Test your backups. A backup that cannot restore is useless.
- Ensure at least one backup is isolated from your daily network activity.

For business owners and local governments, this is critical. Your data includes financial records, contracts, citizen information, project documentation, and years of institutional knowledge. Losing access can halt operations and damage trust.

My situation had a solution. Because of how we structure our environment, I was able to access what I needed from another device. The presentation went on.

But the lesson remains.

Technology failures do not only happen to other people. They happen to professionals. They happen on Sunday mornings before important events. They happen at the worst possible time.

Take five minutes today. Ask yourself where your data is. Then make sure it is protected.

As we close out the first quarter, this is the perfect time to be intentional about how we protect what matters. Review your systems. Evaluate your risks. Strengthen your backups.

Small, proactive steps now prevent major disruptions later. Protecting your data is not just about technology. It is about protecting your time, your reputation, and your peace of mind.

Lisa

All the Ways You Can Back Up Your Data

A Little Leprechaun Logic from Your I.T. Team

Top o' the mornin'! Your friendly IT leprechaun here, popping in with a wee bit of wisdom to help keep your technology pot of gold safe and secure.

Want to improve your cybersecurity luck this St. Patrick's Day? Start with something simple: lock your computer whenever you step away—even if it's just for a quick coffee run.

Think of it like guarding your gold. An unlocked computer is an open door for curious coworkers, accidental clicks, or sneaky cyber mischief. A quick press of Windows + L (or Control + Command + Q on Mac) instantly locks your screen and keeps your data protected.

It's a small habit, but it brings big security luck.

May your passwords be strong, your updates be timely, and your systems stay shamrock-solid all year long!

Ongoing staff training is no longer optional—it's essential!

March is often associated with momentum—new goals, fresh energy, and preparing for what lies ahead. For businesses, it's also the perfect time to strengthen one of the most important layers of your technology strategy: your people.

While companies continue to invest in software, hardware, and security tools, many cyber incidents still begin with a simple human mistake. A rushed click, a reused password, or an unfamiliar email can open the door to serious problems. That's why ongoing staff training is no longer optional—it's essential.

At CST, we offer practical, easy-to-understand training sessions designed specifically for busy teams.

Our sessions help employees:
- Recognize phishing and social engineering attempts
- Use stronger password and login habits
- Understand everyday security risks in email, remote work, and shared systems
- Feel more confident using company technology safely and effectively

Training isn't about pointing fingers—it's about empowering your staff with the knowledge they need to protect themselves and your business. When employees understand why security matters and how threats really work, they become a stronger first line of defense.

March is an ideal time to schedule training before workloads increase, and projects ramp up later in the year. Whether you're onboarding new employees or refreshing existing knowledge, a short, focused training session can make a measurable difference.

If you're interested in scheduling a training session for your team or would like to learn more about our cybersecurity awareness programs, reach out to jessica@cstsupport.com today. Let's make this the month your team gets smarter, safer, and more prepared.