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# Coping Through The Lockdown

Q&A with Damon Roberston  
Managing Director, COOLSPIRiT

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**Coping through the lockdown – Damon Robertson, Managing Director of storage and data protection solution provider COOLSPIRiT, shares his Covid-19 frustrations, his admiration for his team and how he is looking forward to human interaction in full office garb when this is all over.**

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**What has been the biggest impact Covid-19 has had on the business?**

For us it started at the back end of February – Alex Raben (COOLSPIRiT's brand strategy manager) and I were at a conference in San Francisco aimed at tech firms looking at securing funding for growth. We had actually been invited there and had quite a few meetings scheduled, but we ended up flying home a day early, because Covid-19 had started to hit the US and nobody wanted to talk to anyone from Europe. That is when we knew it was serious.

Once we landed back in the UK and went back to the office, we endured a week of uncertainty in the business. One day our engineers were turned away from a couple of financial institutions that they were supposed to be working at because they had decided overnight that they were not allowing people on site. We realised how serious it was getting over here. Then projects began being postponed. After another week of more uncertainty, the prime minister announced the lockdown.



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## How are your employees coping with the change? What have they had to do differently?

Most of the company already had access to our Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) and were using the various apps that we work on, but our permanent business services teams, such as finance and business admin, were office based, so we set them up at home and they were up and running within a day. Everybody lives fairly locally so it was quite painless.

One thing I told the sales team straight away was not to make cold calls as they were inappropriate at the time of lockdown, but to focus on hugging our existing customers and making sure they were OK in those early weeks.

We changed to a set up where just three people were in the office – two of us in separate offices and one guy in the warehouse to ensure we could still get goods out to our customers.

During January and February we experienced shortages that we now know was Covid-19 hitting the Far East, but now the supply chain is back up and running. With me spearheading sales, somebody in purchasing and somebody else in the warehouse and the various teams having daily and weekly Teams meetings, luckily for us business wise and strategy wise we have been unaffected.

Looking ahead, it will impact our top line business. We are only getting new projects from customers who already know us or from projects that we got orders from earlier in the year, so I think May could be a quieter month. We were predicting 35 per cent growth this year but nobody knows what will happen next, we have no prediction for 2020.

In terms of how our people are coping – they accepted in the first week that everything is different and focused on communicating with customers and each other through Teams, emails and calls. However, as time has gone on, I think frustration is setting in because they can't get on with things that they want to do – there are big projects that they now can't start until 2021 and they are realising they have to sit on their hands for a few months.

We have started making some cold calls again this week just to test the water, and discovered that a few people are prepared to talk and share details around projects and plans.

On a personal level, it has been the younger people, perhaps those that live alone in small flats and houses, and have a lonely existence outside the office that are finding it harder, but those with families are coping together. We are in constant communication with each other.

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## Have any people really stood out for you since the lockdown began? Who and why?

Everybody has stood out to be honest, they have all come to the fore. Before all this happened, people in the team were getting a bit 'social media'd up' and using it just to moan at each other, particularly WhatsApp, which started out as positive but just became too negative. We shut our WhatsApp group down the day before lockdown and everybody has agreed it was the right move. People are kinder to each other as a result and are communicating a lot better.

We had a great team before this terrible pandemic, but we have an even stronger group now. Social media can be a little like 'road rage'. Behaviour in the car, for example can be out-of-character. But you would not dream of acting like that in a face-to-face situation.



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## How do you structure your own working day now?

I'm very glad it is Spring, because the better weather helps! I get up at 6am and take the dog for a walk, then it is about getting the kids ready for home schooling which starts at 8.30 so they are signed in and ready to go. They work all day until 4pm with a break for lunch and then finish the day with a local bike ride in the woods.

I start my own working day with daily calls, and I have been trying to keep in touch with the mood of suppliers, manufacturers, friends and family not only in the UK, but in Italy, Spain and the US. It is good to get different opinions on how everybody is thinking.

I then head to the office at 11am and work on tidying everything up – we have managed to get our new website finished, worked on our messaging, and I've been looking at new products and contracts for tenders, making sure everything is updated.

We have a triage system in place amongst the teams to sort out how to best service our customers and make sure they are kept happy, which is working well.

The office shuts at 5pm and I come home and spend time with the family – we have dinner and go for a walk. I'm going to bed a lot earlier. It is pretty much the same at the weekend without going into the office.

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## What has kept you sane since the lockdown?

### *Alcohol!*

On a serious note, I have just kept focused on that 35 per cent growth figure, but accepted that this situation is something we cannot influence, other than monitor what is happening out there and keep in touch with customers and suppliers.

We are all in this together and I think we are perhaps in a much more fortunate position than those businesses that are more customer facing – ie pubs, hotels, physios, restaurants – it has been awful for them. We can keep on working, albeit on a more limited basis.

I have to say our customers, distributors and manufacturers have all been so solid during this awful time. Nobody has taken advantage and we are all working together. I think the Government needs thanks for its business support as well – people are paying on time and all our customers seem to be good.

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## How have your customers reacted and how are they coping with the situation? Have buying patterns/consumption of technology changed noticeably?

I think it is too early to say. We have got everybody to ask a few customers each during the week what technology they would change when we come out of this. Some are driven more to cloud and SaaS, others are not comfortable with that and don't want to be too reliant on somebody getting into their datacentre. Some customers are asking to bring more back on premise and others are wanting to do more with VDI.

On the data protection and security side, everybody is feeling very threatened right now and have not perhaps been quite as guarded with data protection and security as they should have.

Some customers have postponed projects, but are still saying they want to do them, and some customers in the leisure space have virtually shut down and are just keeping the lights on with all capex down to a bare minimum.

We had sold a lot of object storage to quite a few universities recently before all this started – a number of these universities have been working on a vaccine and have three to five petabytes of data that needs storing, so they are glad they made that investment when they did. We are shipping more tape drives and tape libraries this month than we have over the last five years, in fact we have shipped 300 per cent more tape in March than we did over the last three years. It is incredible.

The main reason for the tape purchases has been to protect against ransomware, creating an airgap to feel more comfortable if an attack should happen.

We are lucky to be getting a good reaction from most customers. Of those that don't want to talk right now, we wish them all the best and let them know we are here if they need us.

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## What is the biggest lesson you have learned since the lockdown began?

I think the biggest lesson is that you can't prepare for everything, but you can prepare as much as possible. We had VDI and our apps set up, and laptops/PCs all ready to go. But the key is not to beat yourself up if you were not prepared. So many companies have been caught out with no laptops/VPNs etc during these times, I'm thankful we are not one of them.

I've also learned from my wife who always had the 'just get it done' attitude, whereas I would always wait until the 'perfect' time to do something. Before the lockdown she made me sort out the kids' bikes and get the garden stuff out so we had plenty to do. I was just going to leave it until another time but I'm glad I did as she said, as the garden centres and bike shops all closed after the lockdown. I've learned it is better to just get things done as soon as you can rather than leave it for another time.

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## What do you think will change in the industry when this is all over?

We don't know what will change – but I will keep on talking with manufacturers and investors, and generally keeping in touch with people. It seems to be that when we do come out of this, tech wise, people don't know where they are going to go – will it be more cloud, more SaaS or more on premise? We are getting so many different reactions from customers as I said earlier, that it is hard to tell.

One thing I do think is that the comms industry has been driven during this crisis – whether Zoom, Webex or Teams, collaboration technology needs to be massively improved. When we come out of this, we will use this technology a lot more where we can – it will need to be even better. There has been a lot of panic buying in collaboration technology, so people will be preparing in case this ever happens again and will be expecting more from it.

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## What are you most looking forward to doing when everything returns to normal?

Having an office full of people and meeting people face to face. We are going to turn up to the office in full business attire and a tie to celebrate as soon as we can. I miss the brainstorming sessions we used to have in the office where we come up with new emerging technology ideas and turn them into business opportunities.

I think when this is over people will be a lot better at remote working, but they will need human interaction. I use the example of 'Have I Got News For You' as something that just doesn't work as well remotely – that programme needs human interaction – without the audience the jokes and humour fall flat. It is the same with an office environment, we need to interact once more.

***"I'd like to say a massive thank you to all our community that surround COOLSPIRiT, our customers, vendors, suppliers, friends and family for reacting to this dreadful situation and all pulling together."***

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