# Transcript for the City of Ohio State Podcast Season 4 Episode 8: IT with Rob Lowden

The City of Ohio State Podcast takes a deep dive into the support services that keep Ohio State's Columbus campus running twenty four over seven. Hear from industry experts and facilities safety, transportation, and more. The City of Ohio State podcast is brought to you by the Office of Administration and Planning. Hello, and welcome to the City of Ohio State podcast. I'm your host, Brooke Bartholomew. Last month we chatted back to school safety with OSUPD. This month, we're joined by Ohio State's new vice president and CIO, Rob Lowden, who joined the university on August first ahead of the fall semester. Rob, thanks so much for being with us. Thanks for having me. So there is no busier time of year for someone to start their Ohio State career than right, as classes are beginning to kick off a new academic year. I'm sure it's been a whirlwind, but what has the transition been like for you so far? It's been amazing. It's an incredible organization at an incredibly exciting time to to join and be a part of. And so, you know, as much as August is a short preparation for the beginning of the fall semester, I would say, you know, timing wise couldn't have picked a better time to start. And for those listeners who may not know, you oversee a group called the Office of Technology and Digital Innovation or what we call it OTDI. So can you give us a brief rundown of the size, scale and scope of that team? Absolutely. We're a little over five hundred professional IT employees, highly dedicated to supporting a pretty broad swath of it across the university. We partner with pretty much every college Wexner Medical Center and various units. So we support the majority of the networks of the university. We provide ubiquitous Wi-Fi. So as as a new Buckeye. As I walk across the oval. I'm proud and impressed at the same time for the just ubiquitous Wi-Fi access that I'm sure those that have been here longer take for granted. But as someone new, it's a very distinctive and strong asset that we have. So those are just some of the things that we're responsible for. Yeah, really impressive work happening. And prior to coming to Ohio State, you served in a similar role at fellow Big Ten institution Indiana. In your short time at Ohio State, what have you noticed that's the same or maybe different than at IU? And what has you most excited about being a Buckeye? Other than that Wi-Fi you took the one that was easy win. Super exciting. And you know a true point of pride the Wi-Fi installation that we have. You know, I would say just early into my time as a Buckeye, just absolute professional dedication from the IT organization. It was clear to me as I interviewed for the opportunity, as I met the IT staff, there's a level of dedication and professionalism that both organizations should be proud that they have in place and a truly supportive culture. Um, you know, it folks can can be engineers and very boolean in their decision making. Uh, but, uh, I think a strong differentiator in the academy especially, is when the IT organizations understand and appreciate their role in supporting the mission of the institution. Uh, and it just rings clear. Uh, that is equally true and accurate here at the Ohio State University. And, uh, you know what excited me most about being a Buckeye? Um, I heard we had a winning football team. That's right. You know, maybe it wasn't the most exciting thing. You know, I would say, uh, the focus on AI fluency and, you know, the provost, the president, every faculty member that I've had the opportunity to meet and talk with, um, vice provost, college deans, I think there's just a real sense of enthusiasm and excitement behind a prolific change in technology, where many other institutions might take that, uh, that challenge and be a bit fearful, um, maybe even pessimistic about the impact that it might have on our kind of tripartite mission. But, uh, it's clear to me here, not just from the leadership, but broadly across the entire university. There's really a passion for exploring it and trying to figure out how we can take advantage of this so that, that that was probably one of the most exciting things coming in. Going off of that technology is constantly changing and evolving, but it seems nothing is changing faster than, as you mentioned, artificial intelligence. So how can I support Ohio State's AI fluency initiative to prepare all future students to work and live in an AI world? Yeah, I mean, emphasize the faster than the change of artificial intelligence. You know, I've, I've, I've shared with many, um, you know, we talk about dog years and that's a long period of time, you know, in comparison to human years. And artificial intelligence is really, in terms of pace, the exact opposite. There's a lot of studies out now that are saying that it's, uh, you know, what would take a year in technological change in the past now happens in about three months. The adoption of artificial intelligence, you know, open AI is just an example set worldwide records on achieving a million member mark. That happened in twenty four hours. Um, in comparison, something like Facebook took almost a year to hit those kind of numbers. So, you know, to say that it's moving fast is almost an understatement for the pace of change in technology. Um, and, you know, and when when I think about what the role of ODI is, as fast as it's moving, it's it's a bit nebulous. Um, you know, when you ask somebody, what does artificial intelligence mean to you, you're going to get as many different answers back as people that you talk to. Um, but that's okay. Um, I think that's a good thing, especially in higher education, where we have a culture that reinforces exploration, whether it's exploration in the classroom, exploration in research, or even in the clinical missions. Um, this is a time for broad exploration and AI fluency. The way that we will lead globally in this space is going to be through the strength of our eight thousand seven hundred plus faculty members, exploring it with nearly seventy thousand learners. And so it's exciting. It is going to move fast. It's an ambitious goal to have that, you know, our our students, our undergrads will graduate being fluent in two languages and AI will be one of those two. And so, you know, I think I will be here to support that, uh, both in the beginning, during that period of exploration. But over time, um, it will mature, the space technologically will become more robust. And then you, I think, will see TDI applying its talent, its resources and its processes to implementing that at scale. Um, where it makes sense, where the exploration Operation is resulting in fewer options and more consistent practices. But right now, I would just emphasize it is a period of exploration, and we should be excited about that and embrace that with the skills and strengths that the Academy brings to the equation. Cybersecurity is obviously a big focus of your group. So how critical is the work of this team, and can you give our listeners an idea of the type of volume it handles each month or year? Maybe cybersecurity is critical in any organization. It doesn't really matter if you're a large public land grant, R1 institution or if you're a small company. Cybersecurity plays a critical role in your ability to offer up your services, so it's absolutely critical the work the team does there is incredibly important and relevant. It's also one of those areas where folks don't think about it until something bad happens. And so it's kind of like the lights when they're on. You don't think about how much work, effort and infrastructure is supporting that. When they go out and you're dependent on them, you instantly gain an appreciation and maybe even a bit of a frustration for their not being available to you. The volume that an institution like ours handles in this space, whether you look at things like email as as the number one attack entry point for any organization. So those messages that you get, please don't click on those when you know that it's not an appropriate message. But, um, you know, ninety percent of the volume of mail that comes into the university is not needed. It's spam, it's junk, and it can be malicious and damaging. So a lot of the work that you don't see behind the scenes is blocking those, stopping those, filtering those out so that they don't have a chance to be acted upon. Um, you know, we have almost twenty thousand wireless access points at the institution, indoor, outdoor, every building. There's another critical attack. Vector point is our network. Um, we got some opportunity and our network space. We are a bit distributed in ways that our peers have taken a more traditional, um, and foundational approach to. So we have some opportunities there. But when you have those kind of volumes, we have the second largest deployment of Aruba wireless access points on the planet. We are second only to 7-Eleven, and 7-Eleven has a distribution model. It's a bit larger than ours. So we are a top second. And again, it's a point of pride. You know, the ubiquity of it is impressive. But the To the cybersecurity controls that we put in place there so that visitors, of which we have many to the university can get on and access things to the daily interactions clinically, research educationally and all the spaces across campus. It's pretty critical, important piece, and it gives you a sense of the work and effort that our cybersecurity team puts in on a daily basis. That is incredibly impressive. And the fact that you're saying that we have so many spam emails coming through. I had no idea because I don't even receive them. And that just goes to show back to what you said. I don't receive them because of what the team does. That's so impressive. So since joining Ohio State, you've met with key stakeholders and you've received good feedback about managed IT services operation. So what is MITs and why is that model so successful for the units that have adopted it in your view? So I haven't met with all the deans, but I've met with many and all but one Um, leverages the managed IT services. So in a nutshell, managed IT services really embedded it in a college. Um, some of our peers in the Big Ten have a more aligned IT organization than we have here at the Ohio State University. And, you know, I would say MITs ups are ante in the colleges that take full advantage of the services they provide. It's the same IT folks that were a part of the college that are in the college that know all of the culture and the specifics and the uniqueness of the college, its faculty, its researchers, its staff, its students, its buildings, its classrooms, its it enabled spaces. Um, but they do it in a consistent and collaborative way with the rest of OTDI and the MITS services. So, um, I would say, without exception, um, meeting with the deans that have made the conscious decision to move to this collaborative approach. Uh, glowing support for that. Um, and hopefully, if there's a single other group out there that's not in this model and has interest, uh, I would be very happy to talk with him about taking up the opportunities that are represents, because it it really is core to the collaborative nature of the academy. Um, and and having that aligned, embedded collaborative structure really advances all things in the IT space, including AI fluency. And one last thing. Here we are a little more than one month away from Veterans Day, and I can't help but acknowledge and also thank you for your service to our country. You served in the US Navy, and your service is something you share in common with President Ted Carter. So how do those experiences shape you as a person and a leader. You know, it would be hard to cover in this short interview all the things that I did in my short time, my career in the military was a fraction of President Carter's. Um, you know, I would say it's a commitment to service that, um, one makes consciously and voluntarily, which I think is a very distinguishing component of, of our country. Um, and you the camaraderie that comes out of that experience, um, at a, at a pivotal time, no different than our students coming to campus for the first time at a young age for, for many, um, those experiences in the military at foundational periods in your, your life, um, are lessons and experiences that you apply your whole life. And so it's, uh, it's not uncommon, uh, when folks that have served meet each other for the first time. They they find a kind of a kindred connection very quickly. Um, and so, you know, I they shape you as a person and a leader. I often say, you know, you can learn as much from a poor leader as you can, a strong leader. And maybe you learn what not to do or what you'll never do if you're ever in that role and have that opportunity. But nothing but positive experiences for me personally, um, six years roughly in the Navy, um, and look back at it very fondly. Well, thank you again for your service. And thank you so much for your time today. Welcome to Ohio State. We're proud to have you as a Buckeye. Thank you. I'm excited to be here. The City of Ohio State podcast is brought to you by the Office of Administration and Planning. Until next time, be kind and go Bucks.