Crown Resorts
Case Study

13 years, 1 customer: Lessons in long-term network transformation

For more than a decade, Chris Heywood has worked with Crown Resorts to ensure its network infrastructure delivers the best user experience and commercial outcomes possible. Even after Chris joined Affinity Blue in 2023, that relationship continues to flourish – as does the performance of Crown's network. We caught up with Chris to find out why long-term commitment from technical partners is crucial for larger, complex firms like Crown.

Tell us about your working relationship with Crown Resorts.

Heywood: I've spent 13 years working with Crown. That's included about 10 years on-staff in their Network and IT Ops team; and just over a year as an independent consultant on behalf of Affinity Blue.

Most of my work has revolved around ensuring Crown's network runs smoothly across all three of its Australian resort sites; and finding ways to progressively add business value to that network over time. All up, the network involves nearly 1000 switches and more than 4800 wireless access points – and at that scale, there's always something going on.

How would you summarise the impact you've had working with Crown?

Heywood: I'd like to think I've helped make the network experience more painless and profitable for everyone at Crown.

Crown's network started off with a whole lot of legacy challenges: static configuration, no VLAN segmentation, limited visibility into operations and components. Over the years we've been able to transition Crown onto a much more dynamic network, using Aruba ClearPass to extend transparency and automation throughout more than 17,000 endpoints across all three sites. The guest Wi-Fi experience is now much smoother for Crown's customers and IT Ops spends much less time fighting to keep the lights on.

Taking the pain out of the network has also allowed us to incrementally add commercial value. For example, the previous guest Wi-Fi solution for Crown Resorts had fallen out of support and was costing the business tons to maintain an incredibly cumbersome system. After we migrated to ClearPass, the team's been able to offer a whole range of conference Wi-Fi packages that are proving popular – and profitable – during commercial events.

How has the relationship with Crown changed since you joined Affinity Blue?

Heywood: The goals have remained the same. We want to create the best outcomes for Crown and their customers, not just short-term solutions that don't address the root issues.

Probably the biggest change is the people. Being part of Affinity Blue I've now got a team of technical peers who I can team up with to tackle challenges that would've been harder to take on solo.

For example, we just spent a year building out a full corporate Wi-Fi network solution for Crown using a combination of Microsoft InTune, Azure, and ClearPass. It's significantly improved the user experience for employees – we've already seen usage more than double in our early-stage pilots – and made network access much more secure. I don't think we could've completed the corporate Wi-Fi as quickly and strongly as we did without my colleagues at Affinity Blue pitching in their expertise and effort.

What's kept you working with Crown for more than a decade?

Heywood: Everything I know has come from Crown in some way or another. I've had to reverse-engineer an entire network core that was previously deployed with no documentation and that no-one on the Crown network team was able to manage effectively. I've written hundreds of scripts to automate all sorts of tasks that we wouldn't otherwise have time to handle. My entire certification journey with Aruba started from being at Crown, meeting Aruba as a vendor, and thinking "this is a cool bunch of people to spend time with."

I suppose I've kept at it because I can see the impact of the work. It takes time to really understand the nuances and oddities of any organisation until you can see not just the pitfalls but also the potential. At that point you can really start to bridge the big gaps that others would struggle with. There's no shortcut to this kind of change.

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