

Jim Olson

IBM Distinguished Engineer, Chief Technology Officer of Managed Private Cloud IaaS for Storage

In his first year at Norwalk State Technical College, Jim Olson aspired to start his professional career at IBM. As with everything he does, he was persistent.

Now a 30-year veteran of the company, Jim is all flash—flash storage, that is. One of the many transformations he has shepherded for IBM Global Technology Services (GTS) was a shift, in 2017, to flash storage products. Now overseeing the integration between software-defined storage and IBM Managed Private Cloud for Storage, he continues to push innovation in the company through his long-held philosophy of keeping best practices on track and proactively addressing issues before they can cause harm.

Jim's "hard to harm" philosophy is of great value when helping IBM clients manage digital transformation. As the GTS Chief Technology Officer for Storage, he evaluates technologies to determine how clients can best leverage cost, quality and function. "We need to stay ahead of the curve, while making sure our offering is cost-competitive," he says. "It's a lot of work to make sure we push the boundaries of technology: Which one do we use? How do we use it? Which feature-functions should we use? How do we design the reference architecture?"

IBM GTS' shift to using flash storage ranks top on Jim's list of the transformative changes he has guided. Also high on that list is introducing software-defined storage to IBM Cloud, which he says has opened the door to an increased use of cloud infrastructure. "It complements IBM Cloud," he says, "because it allows enterprises to benefit from the speed of its on-demand capabilities and the flexibility of either increasing or reducing the amount of storage they need at a given moment."

Putting Philosophy into Practice

For Jim, meaningful change for IBM and its clients won't happen without the buy-in of his team, and that often comes after rigorous testing. This is where "hard to harm" comes in handy.

"A big part of everything we do is putting things into practice," he says. "It's more than just theory. Everything we do in a laboratory, we do it in a way to break, twist and push a product harder than any client will." The goal is having testing reveal the best way to leverage the strengths of a technology, while showing how weaknesses can be avoided. Jim's team then standardizes a strict design based on those findings.

Jim adds: "I align everything with my philosophy of 'hard to harm.' We have to stay focused and ensure no technology use causes harm."

Being named an IBM Fellow has prompted Jim to look back on his career and remind others of the importance of mentorships. He still talks to mentors from early in his career, and he goes out of his way now to mentor others. "A great piece of advice I received many years ago," he says, "is to learn from a mentor as well as serve as a mentor."

Jim appreciates how he is now part of a long line of IBM Fellows, and he has advice for those who will follow. "Chase your goals," he says. "Be passionate. Nothing is impossible."

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