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Executive Profile: UKG CTO John Machado on leading technology transitions for big companies

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Editor's Note: Executive Profiles offer insights into the management styles, hobbies and inspirations of the South Florida's C-suite. This Q&A is featured in our weekly print edition.

JOHN MACHADO

Age: 47

Birthplace: Hialeah

Residence: Weston

Current position: Chief technology officer/senior VP of technology and innovation, Ultimate Kronos Group

Previous positions: Multiple positions at Ultimate Software, including senior VP of development and VP of product architecture and product delivery; enterprise technology consultant, EMC; IT director, Ivax Pharmaceuticals

Education: University of Connecticut

John Machado leads a team of about 1,900 technologists at Ultimate Kronos Group, one of South Florida's largest technology companies. He's been at the helm of rapidly changing innovations for his entire career, especially the last 13 years at the company formerly known as Ultimate Software.

But few tech transitions have been as quick as the ones that took place during the pandemic, Machado says.

He led the charge as the company transitioned thousands of employees to remote work essentially overnight. What's more, in the early weeks of the pandemic, the company was in the midst of a multibillion-dollar merger with Boston-based Kronos that was completed in April.



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John Machado, Chief Technology Officer at UKG

What were those first weeks of the pandemic like as the merger was underway? I would say Covid had a bigger impact than the merger. Merger-wise, it was about finding the right balance of keeping our culture and experiences that we had over all those years. [Kronos] had been just as successful as we were for just as long. That's been the interesting part: finding places where we can come together and realize what we did in common and what we can do now because the company is so much larger.

What's been the biggest lesson of working remotely? That working remotely during Covid is not the same as working remotely by design. We all woke up and were told to figure out how to operate in a fully remote world overnight. I had to not only worry about the technology of supporting our customers, but supporting our own people with a high level of expectation of making employees' work life simple. Learning how to do that was the biggest challenge, in terms of speed of adaptation and impact.

What's your favorite remote work app? As technologists – I tell this to a lot of people – forever we wanted people to use communication tools that were less expensive. We were dying for everyone to move to Slack or Microsoft Teams. So Microsoft Teams, across the board, has become the No. 1 favored app. Zoom or Teams has been the must-have-can't-live-without app.

Is this the biggest technology change you've witnessed in your career? Mobile has had a bigger impact on our lives and on our work. Social programs and mobile were bigger transitions. When I first stepped into leading technology for companies pre-mobile, you didn't have this expectation from customers and employees to be 24/7 connected to each other and to the workforce. That didn't exist, and it's evolved since I've been a technology leader.

What's your advice for someone who wants to be a CTO? I used to be obsessed with being really, really deep into whatever the latest technology was. I've learned that to be a really successful CTO, you have to be an expert, but you also have to understand how to problem solve. It differentiates you and makes you a more capable CTO. Your role is to find smarter people than you and grow them along the way. The message I would have given myself 15 years ago would be: Be a technologist and be passionate, but focus on leadership skills and business skills.

What's the hardest part of your job? Having to continually educate the team and yourself with all the changes in technology. If you're going to choose to be a technologist, change is a constant. You have to be prepared to know, no matter how well you solve the problem today, that you may need to resolve the problem again tomorrow. It can be invigorating for some and frustrating for others. You have to adapt to change all over again once you probably have things right where you want them.

How do you balance family and work life? The reality is I've found a way to have them coexist. My best ideas have been from realizing simpler ways to solve problems because I had to help my son or daughter deal with something. I don't think you can have a home and work life; now we have this hybrid life. It's a layered life, and I find time in the moment to give to each.

What are the positives of doing business in South Florida? The negatives? I was born here, left here and came running back here. I'm Cuban American, so my family lives throughout South Florida. The easiest answer is the Atlantic Ocean and Biscayne Bay – that's the best reason to be in South Florida. I think the hardest part is Florida is predominantly a transient and tourism state. The challenge that brings, at times, is that it's hard to keep talent and it's hard to grow startups into larger companies, especially technology businesses.

What are your favorite podcasts/books/shows right now? I'm a music lover. I'm always listening to the "Questlove Supreme" podcast. I also read a lot of technical stuff, different books on technology. As for TV, "The Mandalorian."

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