Zebra Your Edge Podcast

Host:

- **Drew Ehlers, Zebra**

Guests:

- **Willem Toren, Director of Operations, Zebra**
- **Joern Pluempe, HPE Aruba Networking**

Transcript

Drew: Welcome everyone to Your Edge podcast. With this episode, we've got a great partner of ours, Aruba, and we're going to cover new ways to manage Wi-Fi in the warehouse. I'm Drew Ehlers, and in today's episode, we're going to talk specifically around diving deep into probably what keeps you up at night: how to keep all your workers and machines connected and talking to one another inside the warehouse and distribution center environments. Reliable wireless connectivity has become table stakes in today's supply chain operations. No doubt it is certainly here at my home life with my 12 and eight-year-old boys. But certainly in the enterprise space, as we increasingly digitize and automate every workflow and every information flow. So really having that real-time capability and connectivity is mission-critical in the enterprise.

But let's face it, there are days when we feel like it's impossible to maintain a consistent and strong connection between every modality and device and the environment and the systems used to keep our business running, and certainly tapping into the data that's mission-critical and workflows for our frontline workers. With me today, we've got two guests. I've got Joern from Aruba and Willem from Zebra, one of my colleagues across the pond in EMEA. So welcome, gentlemen.

Joern: Thank you. Hello, Drew.

Drew: Willem, quick question for you to start us off as someone who has deep knowledge and a very high-tech, and high-tempo distribution center going for Zebra over in EMEA. I think you would agree. Right?

Willem: Yeah, I totally agree with you. And I can give you some examples. In the past few years, we had two major restructuring events in our facility, and both were already challenging from an operational perspective, we had to get everything done. However, repositioning goods and teams had a big impact on wireless connectivity and signal strength. That was not an easy time for us, for sure. And, yeah, those were even only the big events. But even a change in occupation in addition can have an influence on connectivity. So, yeah, it's really a big deal.

Drew: Very interesting. Let's dig into that just a bit more, because I wonder if there's such a thing as a perfect wireless setup from a warehouse operations perspective. I mean, Joern, you work with a lot of warehouse operation managers and IT teams to make sure that the Wi-Fi infrastructure and connectivity package that you've deployed can support the different technologies in use in that environment. And is it a growing volume of data and voice traffic as we continue to explode and use those use cases to bring the right data at the right time to those frontline workers? Is it ever possible to say we're good to go for a while? Or is Wi-Fi management a daily job? What's your opinion?

Joern: Yeah, for sure. On one side, Wi-Fi management is a daily job. And on the other side, yeah, it's good to go for a while. And we prepare the customers for all these things which come next as well. So, for example, if you see pick by voice is one of the big trends out there in the logistics area, but not every location, not every logistics center is using this big trend out there. And therefore we are preparing our customers with technologies like Zigbee, Bluetooth, or indoor GPS to be ready for some of these new trends coming up in the logistics area.

Drew: Willem, any thoughts on your end?

Willem: Yeah, I think if you're working in a stable environment, it is sometimes good to go for a while. But I also agree with you, Joern, with new technology, with higher demanding bandwidth applications, then you need to invest in these types of things. And from an operator's point of view, it is a slow system or it is working like it should. There's no in-between. So, yeah, a stable connection is a must within a facility like ours.

Drew: Great. And I know, Willem, that you've been driving transformation within your environment. With modalities such as robot techs, you know, cobots to assist the human workers, RFID systems, wearables, and other mobile devices online, do you find that you're making the adjustments needed and, if so, how do you keep that connectivity in your DC?

Willem: Especially after restructuring the warehouse twice, we did multiple site surveys with technical experts to understand blind spots in the facility, replacing access points, fine-tuning, working together with multiple technical teams from a Zebra perspective to understand correct settings, etc., etc. And still, after all this effort, peaks and drops occur. So it is a struggle, especially with all those new technologies within the building.

Drew: And Joern, what's your point of view?

Joern: Yeah, and with our joint solution and our worldwide technology partnership with Zebra, we enable Zebra applications like Workforce Connect to be prioritized in that network. And with the Aruba client match, as Willem told us before, we are able to have an automated mapping of devices at the right available bandwidth, so this is something which helps us with positioning the IPs in the right place to get the best experience for the user here, because that is extremely welcome from the users if we have the right efficiency and the right user experience here.

Drew: Well, Joern, thanks for making us a priority. We really appreciate that. Especially with applications like Workforce Connect that are so mission-critical, the communication collaboration on those frontline workers. I think the AI monitoring tool is very smart, because I can only imagine what happens when the wireless network isn't performing optimally. Willem, maybe you can shed some light on that. How specifically does Wi-Fi network performance impact the performance of other tech in the environment, and how does that impact the frontline worker performance?

Willem: It can be really frustrating for them. It can be very local. It can even be on a device level. So imagine you have a coworker doing the same work you are doing, however, for some reason, your processing speed is a lot slower than your coworker. That is very frustrating and, yeah, imagine how you would feel at the end of the day. It's evident that technology should help the user and not be a burden. I think that is the summary, I would say.

Joern: Yeah, and fully, fully agree. And with our AI-powered user experience from Aruba for the Zebra devices, we are able to show how well the Wi-Fi or the ERP or the URLs on the data center connections are performing and what to do to fix these issues, if there are some. With our joint agent, which runs on the Zebra devices, we get real-time data, proactive, and have the time to analyze the health of the network connection to the important parts of the workflows in the logistics center. Therefore, the IT department can see issues in advance and where they have to solve them via the AI-driven central platform from Aruba. This saves a lot of time and money, which is very important in the logistics centers.

Drew: Well, time and money. We only have a certain amount of both of those two, right? As we all know. So I think this is a really good call out because I don't think everyone realizes the difference between a good and perfect wireless connected package that you have in your environment. Frontline workers start to accept slow, weak connections as normal and work around them. But that's not really optimal. And they didn't have to accept this as normal anymore, do they? What if the IT team could use the AI monitoring tool to anticipate potential issues and get proactive in that environment or see when something isn't working well in real-time and do something about it right then and there? That would certainly alleviate and help with time and money. I'm sure the productivity gains alone are impressive, but also very impactful to the bottom line of the efficiency around that, and also the happiness of the frontline workers, of having a very strong connective signal that they don't have to worry about. They just go about their jobs. Have you ever tried to quantify the benefits of the AI monitoring tool? Do you know how much it is, and has helped warehouse and DC operators like Willem improve productivity and efficiency or reduce Wi-Fi-related operational slowdowns, Joern?

Joern: Yes. So from our side, the most critical point we can measure is when the employees are frustrated and are not able to operate in piecework. This goes directly to the pockets of the employees and to the pocket of the logistic company. This happens when the connection breaks down and the picker has to restart the system of his device. This costs up to 30% of work efficiency.

Drew: Wow. Willem, are you seeing the same thing in your environment?

Willem: Yeah, we have had incidents in the past that cost us up to 30% of work efficiency. Definitely. And this is not only a huge cost, yeah? But it's also where we would disappoint our customer expectations. So we would probably deliver it. And that is a far bigger cost. Another thing is it's not a nice thing to say to the people on the floor, "Hey, we need to do overtime because our system is not working as it should." That is something which is really unsellable on the floor.

Drew: Wow! 30% impact. That is definitely an eyebrow raiser. So I know that the question may be answered with a little bit of bias since Aruba and Zebra worked so well together to help develop this AI-based Wi-Fi monitoring tool and load it on a Zebra device. But why was the tool so important to develop? Well, I think that we're starting to see why and why it's so valuable to use it. And I think we're starting to see some of those answers, too. But are there other ways to monitor Wi-Fi network performance? So what makes this approach so different? Perhaps even from an AI-powered monitoring technique? Joern, what are you seeing?

Joern: So the mobile user experience agent from Aruba goes over and above. It shows the real movement of devices. This is not a static monitoring. This shows up directly where the issues are and how to solve it with AI. It is not mostly the Wi-Fi which causes problems. Connection issues are diverse in the data center, URLs are not reachable or the ERP system is down. But if you have no idea where to search from the start, that is very expensive in an operating environment. We propose everyone to use this solution in the warehouse with the integration of user experience in the Aruba Central AI-powered platform. We have a single view dashboard from which the customer could directly go to the failure system and fix it, with the AI support of the central platform from Aruba.

Drew: Wow. Willem, what do you think about the tool?

Willem: Okay, this is a really good tool and it shows you when the problem is occurring. It is sometimes really tough to understand the root cause of issues without having the correct data. And in a big corporation like Zebra, there are multiple teams responsible for different aspects of connectivity. You have an application team, you have a database team, a networking team, you name it. Before understanding the root cause, a user on the floor and a supervisor need to jump through multiple hoops to get support and be very persistent in asking for support. Now with this dashboard, it is easier to find the root cause behind the problem and direct it to the appropriate IT support. And that is very valuable.

Drew: Wow, I bet you that helps with the 30% of efficiency loss, right? And helping impact that positively. But more importantly, moving from reactive to proactive so that you can fight those challenges as you start to see them pop up. I want to stay on that topic of collaboration for just a minute because with the massive amount of technology in play in the warehouses today, no one can imagine these systems and connections alone. So certainly someone may be focused on the Wi-Fi network performance, but they can't be successful if they don't understand how the systems work and what others are trying to do with the technology. And I suspect that the reason Zebra and Aruba have so much success in helping customers achieve their goals is because we understand that we can't help our customers independently. We must work together. So therefore our partnership is not just a memorandum of understanding or partnership on paper. Our teams physically come together as if we are the same organization to jointly ideate, develop, integrate, test and implement hardware, software, firmware, etc. to help deliver those valuable outcomes that our joint customers want today. And most importantly, we come together in support of customers after the deployment. They aren't having to chase someone at Zebra or Aruba, and we aren't just providing the support in a silo. We're bringing that effort together to coalesce an experience that's impactful, that can help solve the problems and deliver the outcomes that they want. I find that very powerful. But how does that translate into better outcomes for warehouse operations in the real world? Joern?

Joern: Yeah, you said it right. This is a real technology partnership where we both stop the vendor ping pong, where one vendor is moving a customer problem to the next vendor just to reduce his workload and optimize this workflow on that one. Aruba and Zebra are showing a real partnership with a joint technical approach, not only in the buying cycle, even in the post-sales cycle where we show our customer first, customer last mentality.

Drew: I love that. And Willem, obviously you have this deployed in your environment. You know, what are your thoughts on the partnership?

Willem: Yeah, that's essential. And while we are quite blessed there because we use most of the Zebra equipment, of course, and together with Aruba networking, and we have great support teams available. But also making sure the correct issue is selected for support also allows for better resolution time when problems do occur and less time of disruption. And then that allows us to support our customers as good as we can. So yeah, it's essential.

Drew: So starting with Zebra is a good thing, and "customer first, customer last" mentality. I love that. Very well summarized by you two. We talked about many people experience subpar Wi-Fi connectivity and just start to accept it as the norm. But I think that ties into the notion of finding the right technology providers to partner with from a customer point of view. If you're used to getting subpar support when things aren't going well or wrong, you just try to slog along and figure it out. And maybe you will, but maybe you won't. And I'm just not sure if that's a great experience. One from a customer point of view, but especially for your frontline workers who are just trying to get their work done and make an impact on their employer. But it doesn't have to be so difficult to work with those problems. If you have a partner or set of partners and a team of experts, companies like Aruba and Zebra, that provide a joint level one support team, that you can pick up the phone and call and talk with through those issues that you may or may not be having to find a resolution to. I mean, I said this before, but sometimes I feel like people put as much emphasis on finding the right device or software or wireless network infrastructure, that they forget that the only way those things will work as needed is if you have the right people piecing it all together with the testing and the adjustments, and really knowing your environment and really looking at it from a holistic solution to deliver the outcomes that you want and solve for the problems in those different environments. Willem, you know, as an expert, what are your thoughts?

Willem: Yeah, no, I totally agree with you. Hey, if you find the correct expert, if you find the correct team, these things are easy to resolve. And I think the partnership of Zebra and Aruba makes sure that there is expertise to deal with these connectivity issues, or even before they occur, between a wireless network and Zebra devices. And that will really decrease the time to resolve issues and smoother operations.

Joern: Yeah, we think it is very important to teach the support teams on both sides on the partner technology to reduce the time to fix the support case. We don't see this very often in the IT security business.

Drew: Absolutely brilliant. Well, any last thoughts before we sign off, gentlemen? Anything you think the people who are listening and watching that you'd like them to remember when they're trying to get a strong Wi-Fi network connectivity environment in place with the solutions to help them manage it in a way that's supportive, proactive of a growing tech stack that's increasing the network traffic and helping deliver those outcomes and the data to the frontline workers? Joern?

Joern: There are so many new technologies we need to implement in the logistic business in the coming years. So be prepared with Aruba and Zebra for what's coming next.

Willem: Yeah, I agree with you, Joern. In the next couple of years, there's a lot of exciting things coming for the logistic businesses. And it's also important to make sure the right investments are made, especially for a high-paced distribution channel that is keen to make the investment in the right areas. And networking is definitely one of them.

Drew: Wow. Joern, Willem - It's been a fantastic discussion. I really appreciate it. And you know, thinking customer first and customer last and really working together to help drive that joint outcome and deliver that value together with Aruba and Zebra together, it's just been absolutely impactful. So if you're looking for a solution and partners to help deliver that and to be there when good times are good and bad times are bad and the challenges come up that Aruba and Zebra are there for you today. Have a great day.

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