

Edmonton considers divorcing Microsoft

By Stefan Dubowski

“I told Microsoft I’m giving them their divorce papers,” says City of Edmonton CIO Chris Moore. The municipality’s IT department is considering walking away from Microsoft Corp. applications and investing in open source instead. It’s just one step in a major IT transformation, the CIO explains.

The municipality has decided that proprietary software is too expensive, and out of step with the direction it wants to take in IT. “It’s not that we don’t like Microsoft,” Moore says. “It has a bit to do with the economics. We spend a ridiculous amount of money just to use the software. It’s more about our desire to provide leadership in openness and collaboration in systems and sharing.”

The move to open source is one part of the transformation, which stems from a desire to see Edmonton’s IT department draw on home-grown talent, Moore says.

Many IT department staff members are comfortable administrating open-source platforms, Moore says. “There’s already a group of people here in IT who understand that world. But they’ve never been allowed to express their knowledge and understanding, because we’ve been kind of rigid.”

Moore says the IT department is also investigating a new virtualization software model that would push applications out to end-user computers from a centralized server, so it wouldn’t matter what kind of computer the user has – Mac, PC, netbook, desktop, whatever.

“We plan to implement that in the next 12 to 24 months,” Moore says. “One of the drivers for us is cost. There’s an opportunity to save money. And we don’t want to alienate the younger generation. They basically say, why should I have to use the man’s technology? The technology I have works for me. Why should I have a work computer and a home computer? Why can’t I use my device within the work setting? ... We’ll look at security and access, because as a municipality we manage our risk. But we want to leverage those opportunities.”

Other changes include new partnerships and vendor-relationship models. For instance, the IT department is teaming up with the recently-formed Edmonton New Technology Society (ENTS) – a group of Edmonton tech experts setting up an open-concept technology workspace to experiment on novel hardware and software techniques. (*Watch the InformationExec homepage for a story about ENTS soon. – Ed*)

Edmonton’s CIO met ENTS’ directors at an IT vendor open house hosted by the municipality in June. “I was thinking, wow, this is exactly what I was hoping we could create,” Moore says of the New Technology group. “And I thought, why should we create it when it already exists? Why don’t we just partner with them... and work together on initiatives that would move the community forward – not from an information technology perspective, but in terms of sustainability in government?”

For Moore, sustainable government means changing the way the IT department operates. “We’ve had to change the way we were... We were not communicating with our internal customers. We were too management heavy. We weren’t being clear on our direction, our vision.”

In a series of meetings, IT staffers devised a list of attributes (“empowered,” “flexible,” and “supportive” among them) to aim for. Now they’re in the process of changing the department’s resource infrastructure to achieve those goals – amending the groups and subsections, and assigning people to projects according to

employees' abilities, skills, and availability.

Back on the technology side, Edmonton has also investigated using Google Inc.'s free business productivity applications as an alternative to Microsoft's Office 2007 suite. But Moore says it's important for people to understand that these changes go well beyond questions of software choice.

"Forget Google and forget open source. This is one of our connections to ENTS. They are open. They are a reflection of the community. They want to be collaborative. We're moving towards open source, but we feel we have a corporate and social responsibility within the economy of Edmonton to provide leadership towards a move to open. It's not about no longer using Microsoft and using StarOffice. It's the whole concept of making the data we have open and available, as long as there are no issues around freedom of information and privacy."

Edmonton is making its decision public just as Microsoft is unveiling its latest operating system. Windows 7 is expected to be on volume-licence price lists in September. According to Elliot Katz, Windows client product manager for Microsoft Canada, Windows 7 will likely have an important impact on the technology market, and the IT economy.

"The movement to Windows 7 is quite substantial. Of course, we're always keeping an eye on the competition and what's going on in the marketplace," Katz says. He points out that IDC recently said that on a worldwide basis, every dollar of Microsoft revenue generated from the moment Windows 7 launches to the end of 2010 will generate \$19 of revenue throughout the ecosystem. "It's a substantial number, and it's very important to the marketplace."