

Training beings for CIO of Vancouver Olympics 2010

By: Neil Sutton On: 14 Jun 2007 For: ComputerWorld Canada

Heading up the IT infrastructure of the Vancouver Olympics in 2010 is sure to be a daunting challenge but is a role that Ward Chapin has accepted - with a little trepidation. "I kind of felt like the dog that chased the car and caught it," Chapin told a crowd of attendees on Tuesday at the Global Connect conference.

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Nortel is one of the key IT partners for VANOC (Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games). The company, along with Bell Canada, Ricoh and Atos Origin, will work behind the scenes to provide the networking and IT. A hardware partner hasn't been announced yet, but expectations are for 5,200 laptops, 560 servers and 1,000 printers.

The Games' IT budget is \$343 million, but 75 per cent of that cost will be defrayed through these partners in exchange for sponsorship and marketing rights. "In the banking service, you paid lip service (to sponsors)," said Chapin, a veteran of the financial services industry.

"With this...they're fully integrated. I sometimes compare it to a marriage, but divorce is not an option."

VANOC will operate 53 business units at Games time. It currently employs 400 people but that number will be ramped up to 1,400 by 2010. Among those employees will be IT specialists from each of the sponsors. Chapin said his goal is to integrate all of those people such that you won't be able to tell which company they originate from.

One of Chapin's most important roles is restraint: no bleeding edge technology will be allowed near key functions.

There's too many risks involved with IT with little or no track record, he said. In fact, no technology younger than two years (at 2010) will be involved in Games operations.

The goal is to keep it as simple as possible: "In my past lives, I've seen too many projects where the service provider went off into a dark room (by themselves)," said Chapin. The end result is often technology with a huge range of functionality, but little of it is any use to the client.

"I know it's heresy for a guy (in my position) to say he's putting the reins on technology, but it's the right thing to do in our case."

Chapin has also learned from his predecessors. He was present at the 2006 Winter Olympics in Torino, Italy, and is on the phone to the CIO for the Salt Lake City Games at least once a month to get some pointers.

Double, and sometimes triple redundancy, is necessary, said Chapin, particular as far as power is concerned.

Uptime is foremost in his mind and there's no margin for error: VANOC is contractually obligated to make results available one third of a second after an event is completed.

It's often the little things that can go wrong, said Chapin. At a previous Winter Olympics, a panel of skating judges lost power to their monitors. It was later discovered that a cleaning lady had pulled a plug out of the wall in order to do some vacuuming.

Nortel's recent successes in the enterprise space, not the least of which is a prominent place in the Vancouver Olympics, couldn't have come at a better time.

Chapin said the Olympic committee met with most of the well-known vendors in the networking market but chose Nortel as a partner for a variety of reasons: they were already working closely with Bell Canada, one of the Games' IT pillars, and they exhibited a desire to work hand in hand with VANOC to meet its unique goals.

They're also a Canadian company, which wasn't a pre-requisite, said Chapin, but provided a feel-good moment for the Olympic organizers.

"When you've lived through something that Nortel's lived through in the last few years, it really takes some reassurance that everything's going well," said Paul Templeton, Nortel's GM of enterprise voice, in a veiled reference to the company's notorious run-in with the Securities and Exchange Commission following a series of accounting scandals.

Partnerships with IBM and Microsoft have put the company back on track, according to execs who attended. Nortel took the wraps off a unified communications solution targeted towards the SMB market which the company developed in partnership with IBM. The Nortel-IBM System i Unified Communications solution is designed to integrate IBM's System i products and Lotus Sametime with Nortel's VoIP suite.