

'Target for every hacker on planet'; BIG JOB: Games IT boss Ward Chapin also has to worry about power, PAs, phones . . .

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Ward Chapin, Vancouver 2010's information-technology boss, is taking extra steps not to mess up.

Just as well, if past Olympic organizing committees are anything to go by.

Like the time at the 1992 Albertville Winter Games during one of the figure-skating long programs, when all the judges' terminals suddenly went blank.

"There was a lot of scurrying around, and all of a sudden the terminals came back on and they could score the event," Chapin says, grinning.

It turned out the screens were plugged in to a power bar that snaked its way back into a nearby lounge.

"During the event, a cleaning lady had come along and needed a place to plug in her vacuum cleaner and had unplugged the power bar," he chuckles.

During the lead-up to the 2006 Turin Olympics, a set of timing sensors were wrongly placed at a downhill skiing test event.

"They put the sensors at the base of a very steep part of the hill," he says. "The skiers came flying down the hill, took off and flew over the sensors -- and that totally messed up the scoring."

Chapin is at the helm of a \$343-million Olympic IT operation that includes TV coverage, computer networks, timing and scoring, results, scoreboards, jumbo video screens, public address systems, phone service and security cameras.

If anything goes wrong -- like a power failure where the backup system doesn't kick in -- it could be seen by up to two billion TV viewers around the world.

"A lot of things have to be tested for the things we hope never happen," says Chapin. "If we have an outage, we can fix it in milliseconds."

Chapin, who comes from an IT background in banking, says his department's master plan contains more than 1,580 tasks.

"We have an early warning system where we walk through each active project on a monthly basis and ask, 'Is it on schedule? Is it on budget? Do we have enough resources?'" he says.

He says that 75 per cent of his budget comes from sponsors' in-kind donations.

Chapin says Vancouver 2010 will make sure it has plenty of backup power.

"Everything has to be tested and retested, and there'll be 100,000 hours of testing between now and 2010," he says.

"I like to build in a tremendous amount of redundancy to make sure our systems are bulletproof."

A 464-square-metre technology lab will be set up so that every aspect of IT can be tested several times.

Chapin says equipment will also be put through its paces at test events -- usually World Cup events or national championships -- starting 18 months before the Games.

About three months before the opening ceremonies comes a technical rehearsal at a live event.

"We throw in all sorts of evil scenarios," he says. "The race could be going on and you unplug the [computer] server because you want to see the backup server kick in."

"Or you tell the venue manager he's been 'taken deathly ill' and you want the assistant manager to take over and see how he handles all the evil scenarios you throw at him."

There'll be a main data centre in Vancouver that will handle video and information from every venue, before distributing it to the downtown broadcast centre and around the world via the Internet.

A secondary data centre is being set up in case of a disaster. Officials are now planning where to put it.

"We're deciding whether to set it up two miles away -- or 100 miles away, in case of a major earthquake," says Chapin.

"But if there's a major earthquake, would the Games still go on?"

Vancouver 2010's East Vancouver HQ will hold an IT operations centre.

"It will be in a huge room that looks a bit like NASA, with hundreds of screens, staff monitoring all aspects of the network, all applications and security, during the Games," says Chapin. "We are a target for every hacker on the planet."

Chapin says his department is already reserving frequencies for the 7,000 two-way radios that coaches, athletes, organizers and security officials use during the Games.

He's also overseeing 90,000 accreditation passes that must interface with Immigration Canada and CSIS for security checks.

There's also scheduling for the thousands of buses and official vehicles, as well as athlete accommodations.

Not to mention the Vancouver 2010 website, which will get millions of hits per day during the two-week Games.

Chapin also needs to be sure there's enough cellular phone capacity.

"No venue will need more coverage than B.C. Place during the opening ceremonies, with 60,000 people all using telephones to call home to Ma telling her where they are," he says.