

Second system

by Lucy Peterson*

Computer decisions shaped by current and future needs.

Eze Rent-it Centre in Chilliwack, British Columbia, is a single location, general, rental business with plans to open a second branch in the next six months. Centreline Equipment Rentals, based in London, Ontario, is staying one step ahead of customers' needs at three of its locations. More than 3000 kilometers apart, these two companies share a common approach to their recent computer purchase decisions.

"For the last 12 or 13 years we were on a UNIX-based system at the front counter," explains Russ Walsh, president and co-owner of Eze Rent-It Centre. "It did the job for us, but it had run its course. It was time to see what else was out there."

Eze took a team approach to the shopping process. "Our lead accounts receivable person, our branch manager, my brother and I looked at several systems together. It was a push from Bill Vermeer, our branch manager, that led us to focus on Windows based products. Bill's been with us 16 years, and he felt that Windows would interact better with most other technologies out there today. There was also a personnel consideration; we felt that a Windows system would be easier for new employees to train on."

Walsh says that his company looked at several systems before finding what they wanted in the Enfinity system from Solutions by Computer. "We've known the company for years, and we have done business in the past, even though the UNIX system we were running on was not a Solutions system. We included this company's software on a list of systems to investigate, along with two or three others. When we saw a demo, everyone was impressed with the versatility and flexibility of the software. We liked the ease with which you could make changes and adjustments."

Flexibility is chief among the criteria that Eze set for its system purchase. The rental company, which serves one of British Columbia's highest growth markets, expects to open a second general rental location before the end of the year. "UNIX, as an operating system, is bulletproof but it's also pigeon-holed," says Walsh. "Our experience, at least with the system we had, was that UNIX is a powerful box. But if you want to do something that doesn't fit into the box, well, that's an issue."

Eze Rent-it Centre has been running the Windows based software parallel with its original system and verifying the results on a daily basis, a standard procedure before switching to a new system. "We bought the new software having formed certain impressions of it: that it is very adaptable and very quick at the counter. And that's proving to be the case."

The Centreline experience

Centreline Equipment Rentals approached their second system purchase from a different perspective, having opened its doors in 1990 with Solutions by Computer's CounterPRO system already in place. "We don't think of our system as separate from our operation," explained



Scott Teron, general manager for Centreline Equipment Rentals.

co-owner Al Bertoia back in 1998. "It's our management system and it's completely essential."

Nevertheless, the ISO 9002 certified company wanted to investigate all of its options when deciding to replace its aging server this year. Scott Teron, general manager, describes the process: "There were four of us, the owners Al and Louis Bertoia, Leo Manchisi and me. Leo is the systems operations manager for all three of our branches. Our decision to look at systems together and in-depth had a lot to do with moving forward, growing the company and meeting customer expectations.

"Centreline is successful because we put a priority on continuous improvement. We are always working to raise the bar, to set higher standards. Our existing computer software is a great system, a strong tool for managing

equipment. It served us well for 15 years, but we came to the conclusion that UNIX was not going to be able to do everything we wanted, going forward. We wanted a system that would manage the complete business and support our growth strategies. Windows opens up a lot of new doors."

The Centreline team asked suppliers to incorporate question-and-answer sessions into their demos so that specific business needs could be discussed. "For example, dispatch is a big component of our business," Teron explains. "Also, pricing flexibility, discounts and how transaction data is presented on paper. Customers want that and we have to be able to offer it. Propane sales, maintenance and repair of customer-owned equipment... there are a lot of sides to our business, and there may be new sides in the future. We didn't want a system to just get us through tomorrow or next week; we tried to look far down the road and buy the tools and flexibility that would get us there."

That word 'flexibility' surfaces time and again with Teron, as it does with Walsh, while both add that functionality is also crucial. "To be honest, it's the whole package. The software must allow for flexibility. All equipment rental companies do the same thing, basically, so most rental systems do the same functions at the core," says Teron. "The software will allow us to customize so many different things: the appearance of contracts, the application of rates, the way we import and export data from the system and the way we view information.

"Another thing that really intrigued us is the way we'll be able to do a lot of the updates and customizations ourselves after the initial training. The database is set up really well for that," he adds.

Walsh also got a good look at the database structure before purchase. "The time savings is huge," he says. "If you want to apply pricing to SDS carbide drill bits, for example, and you have 30 sizes, you can give one customer group a 10 percent discount on just those drill bits without having to go into each item and applying that discount. The software sets the data up in a tree structure. You click once on the parent node for SDS and indicate the discount for that customer group and snap! - it's done.

"The other thing that is bringing a lot of efficiency to our operation is the unattended processing feature," Walsh adds. "The system will run periodic invoices overnight, or even while the system is in operation. You come in and the invoices are sitting there waiting for you, posted to AR. We used to spend six to eight hours a month on those billings. We'll use that time more productively now."

The jump to the new operating system is still down the road a bit for Centreline, whose purchase took place recently. The company is in the earliest stages of implementation and hopes to have its new system running by the fourth quarter. Management went into the computer decision with eyes wide open, Teron says. "We looked at a lot of systems, spent a lot of time with each vendor to make sure we saw the best



Russ Walsh, president and co-owner of Eze Rent-It Centre in Chilliwack, British Columbia.

and worst of what they had to offer. That played a big part... we didn't just want to hear the good things, we also wanted to hear the bad things, the downfalls. Overall, it was a three to four month process."

Size and credibility

Both Walsh and Teron point to supplier strengths as a key part of the purchase decision, emphasizing that a good vendor should have a knowledgeable sales representative. Rental industry veteran, Barry Ossea represented the system developer in both cases.

"The company behind the system was very important to us," emphasizes Walsh. "There were several things that I looked at: the reputation of the company and its representatives, and the size of the company. I started by calling several rental operators in Canada who had been with the vendor for years, and the theme that kept coming through was that support was very good. We went with a company that had a solid track record of credibility with its products and services.

"The other things that were important to us looking forward were size and resources – specifically, number of people. Does the vendor have a very large support staff? You might have to personally deal with 12 or 15 people and they should all know the product," adds Walsh.

While Centreline has yet to need customer support on their new software system, they have ample experience with it through their previous operating platform. "The company is very, very important," Teron concurs. "We're not just buying something from a company where it's over and done with after the

transaction. It's the whole package: their support, their knowledge base, where they plan to take their own company in the future. It's a relationship, and that relationship is going to be there for how many years we use the system. We've had a lot of dialogue about that."

Two different companies, two different points in the 'second system' purchase process. Even so, the commonalities are striking: Eze Rent-it Centre and Centreline Equipment Rentals are both forward-looking

organizations with energetic management and a clear understanding of their technology needs. Those qualities factored into computer decisions thousands of kilometers apart and arrived at the same destination. ■

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