

Better service + HR budget = IT CREATIVITY

in Nova Scotia

By Maria Cootauco



As one of the largest not-for-profit health care providers for seniors in Halifax, the Northwood care facility had a challenge on its hands when it set out to build a third facility on the outskirts of the city without hiring new staff or making major changes to its existing infrastructure.

Northwood, which provides long-term care, independent living, home care and community outreach to 6,300 seniors, wanted to open 150 beds as part of its community-based approach to care. With its third site slated to open in April, Northwood needed a way to help expand capacity and offer new services while maintaining the same staffing levels.

“We wanted to make sure that we could leverage existing technology well and kind of integrate it into our overall set up,” said Jay MacIntyre, Northwood’s director of IT.

The facility looked to xwave, a technology solutions provider headquartered in Halifax, for a technology review that yielded a blueprint and implementation plan. The review included 151 recommendations.

A pivotal suggestion involved moving Northwood from its Novell Inc. servers to Microsoft Corp. servers. “It helps us with integrations,” MacIntyre said. “Applications that we use that are Microsoft-specific, like our financial systems, will integrate better with a Microsoft environment than they do in a Novell environment.”

In anticipation of the expansion’s April 1 grand opening, MacIntyre’s team is in the process of migrating the facility’s Groupwise e-mail platform to Micro-

soft's Exchange and Outlook. Switching e-mail systems and servers are the top priorities for Northwood before opening its third facility.

"They wanted to move from an evolved infrastructure to a planned one," said Steve Harris, the project's lead consultant and a principal consultant at xwave. "They had grown to this place and they had done so through hard work and very good work. But in essence, they still had an evolved infrastructure that they were supporting and they could not expand to the new location and do that in the same evolved manner because it would not be able to be done with the existing support staff."

Luckily, Northwood had already made the foray into server virtualization, which could help keep costs down in the long run and help the organization with its green efforts. Almost 90 per cent of the organization's servers are virtual, an ongoing effort for the past five years. Piggybacking on Northwood's existing consolidated environment, xwave's recommendations included managing the desktop environment remotely so that PCs shut down at the end of the work day, but can be woken up in the middle of the night for software patches.

"We've been getting rid of our physical servers and putting them all in one big box that uses less power," MacIntyre said. "(The blueprint) kind of reinforced that was a good direction to go and anywhere possible, we should be doing that."

Situated in a climate prone to snowstorms, the facility needed a more stable network with minimal network outages. Using the third facility, xwave tried to create a plan that would allow for a high availability component where should one network location go down, another location could be made available.

"Now, as soon as a site becomes unavailable, those same services are then automatically made available through our high-availability configuration at another site," Harris said. "So they wouldn't even notice a difference other than it might not perform quite as fast."

The new Northwood facility hasn't opened its doors yet, but MacIntyre is hopeful that implementing some of xwave's recommendations may help Northwood deliver expanded services with minimal spending. "That was one of the reasons we brought (xwave) in," he said. "We

wanted them to do as much as possible with the investment already made ... and make sure that we weren't spending extra money when we could utilize or leverage existing technology."

Of xwave's recommendations, Harris surmised "it's taking (technology) so that IT no longer just becomes a cost, it becomes a means to solving your business problems."

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