Microsoft CIO braves bugs, breaches as head beta-tester

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Sun Microsystems Inc. famously forbids its employees from using Microsoft Office. Novell Inc. forced its workers to switch off Windows to SUSE Linux after buying the open-source operating system.

But if you can believe Ron Markezich, Microsoft Corp.'s CIO for IT, none of his bosses, not even hyper-competitive CEO Steve Ballmer, would bat an eyelash if he rolled out a non-Microsoft product internally.

"I could go and buy an Oracle database if I wanted to," said Markezich. In reality, while Markezich uses plenty of third-party software in-house, he also aims to make Microsoft the best living testimony to the merits of adopting an integrated Microsoft platform.

"This is not marketing talk," the 39-year-old University of Notre Dame graduate and former Anderson consultant said in an interview last week at Microsoft's Management Summit in San Diego. "I truly believe that a standardized Microsoft platform is the best way for me to do my job, and that Microsoft products are the best out there."

In an industry that highly regards those that eat their own cooking, Microsoft gorges itself. It uses SQL Server 2005 to run a huge 1.9TB database that supports its global SAP R/3 ERP system. It also manages 340,000 PCs and devices, virtually all of them on Windows, including more than 15,000 PCs running the upcoming Windows Vista. Its Exchange-based e-mail system holds more than 120,000 e-mail server accounts and handles an average of three million internal e-mails and 10 million e-mails from outside the company per day. Markezich, who has been CIO for two years and helped manage Microsoft's internal IT for 11 years, said that adopting Windows Server 2003 and related products enabled the company to save US$100 million over three years. Those savings came from, among other things, cutting the number of infrastructure servers by 30 percent, slashing the number of Exchange mail servers in half and saving 40 percent on the cost of backups.

"I couldn't have said Microsoft products were the best eight years ago," he said. "But I could say it after the 2003 wave."

Microsoft not only uses its own software wherever possible, but also as early as possible. Markezich begins rolling out all upcoming Microsoft software a full year before its final release -- the same time as members of Microsoft's Technology Adoption Program (TAP), its elite corps of corporate beta testers. The difference is that while TAP members are only required to install the software in non-working environments, Markezich puts all of the beta software straight into production.

To anyone familiar with the myriad of screaming headlines about Microsoft security holes or bugs, that may seem foolhardy. But Markezich said that installing Microsoft software in beta stages -- software which he still technically pays for -- helps his team wring out cost savings that keep him within his 3 percent of annual revenues spending limit. (Based on Microsoft's $40 billion in sales last year, that still amounts to more than $1.2 billion.)

Markezich is looking for similar savings as he upgrades to betas of Microsoft's next wave of software, including Windows Vista, Windows Longhorn Server, Exchange 2007, Office 2007, System Center Configuration Manager 2007 (formerly SMS v4) and others. For instance, using the System Center Operations Manager 2007, formerly codenamed MOM v3, Markezich hopes to drive the ratio of alerts-to-tickets-generated by his management software from 1.3-to-1 down all the way to 1-to-1. That will reduce work for his staff.

As part of its "24X7" internal IT initiative that began last July and lasts for two years, Microsoft hopes to drive seven million hours of increased productivity, or about five hours per employee per month. It envisions that productivity coming from making current processes more efficient and enabling new ones via technology such as Office Live Communications Server 2005 and the Communicator 2005 instant messaging...
software client. Markezich said that technology improves employee productivity by 3 percent and leads to $48 million per year in productivity benefits, and figured that he's already ahead of schedule, having already wrung nearly four million extra hours in the past 10 months.

Though they have perhaps the best warts-and-all view into Microsoft software while in development, Markezich downplays the influence he and his team have on the final products.

"I don't even track our suggestions because I guarantee that if it's an important enough issue, others are making the same suggestions," he said.

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