



The  
devil

in  
the

## details

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## Reader ROI

## READ THIS ARTICLE TO LEARN

- ❖ Why The Edge has centred its data management around a Lotus Domino platform.
- ❖ How The Edge, under Natasha Pearce's guidance, has brought together numerous databases under a single platform.
- ❖ Where Pearce plans to take The Edge's information environment.
- ❖ What Pearce has achieved so far.

Natasha Pearce's tale of change and innovation at The Edge, Auckland's performing arts complex, has a familiar ring to it. It's a tale that's easily told but the hard work — as always — has been in keeping the project on the straight and true path ...

Sometimes a CIO's job can seem pedestrian. Until you get to the details, that is. The war stories tend to have similar echoes from business to business. You take on a new project. You go through the RFI and RFP processes and eventually you choose a supplier, an application base and maybe an outsourcer or two. You take charge of the development and integrate the old with the new and, along the way, you encounter the usual delays, training and people management issues. Ho hum.

So easy to say, so hard to do well.

Take Natasha Pearce, information services manager at The Edge, Auckland's performing arts complex centred around Aotea Square and comprising the city's Town Hall, the Civic Theatre building and the Aotea Centre. She joined the organisation a couple of years ago as The Edge was undergoing the inevitable transition from being a business where its scattered databases and other software needed to be transformed into a cohesive, rationalised working environment. At that time, Microsoft featured strongly in the choice of applications, including Outlook for email and various SQL databases. Today, Microsoft continues to play a major role, but the heart of the application lineup is based

around Lotus Domino.

Pearce is happy with the choice. Domino is basically simple to use and set up, she says. It has enabled the organisation to extend its collaborative efforts and is the basis of a new portal, a customer relationship management system and a document management system.

"Initially they asked me to do the consultation for the intranet," she says. "I built up the business case into an RFP and then they asked me to roll the project through. By the time we had finished, a whole new role had been established and they asked me to continue on with all the information practices."

Staff at The Edge were tired of having to re-enter data. They were tired of having five different places to look for information. They were tired of not having systems talking to each other. They wanted to rationalise their information input and spend more time talking to customers. Most CIOs will have heard these complaints expressed at some stage before in their own organisations.

Pearce's background is different from that of most CIOs. Her degree is in history and psychology. When she left university she had worked at the Aotea Centre helping the records administrator. From there, she went to Auckland City Council, which gave her some postgraduate training in records management.

Eventually she left for the Big OE, but not before she had a stint as records and administration manager at Te Papa. This position included responsibility for Te Papa's website, information centre and research library.

The obvious question is whether she finds it easy to work with IT people. "I do," she says. "Sometimes I get them to explain things to me but I find that I understand enough to be able to bridge the gap between everyday users and IT fanatics."

Anyway, she believes, technology is becoming less important than it was where outcomes are concerned. The result of Pearce's efforts is Edge Net, an internal portal made up of three major components. The first part is the portal

itself; the second is a contact database called, naturally enough, Contact Manager; and the third part is the electronic document management system, Document Store.

The system is based around Lotus' native environment, with staff accessing it remotely when they need to. Most users are based in The Edge's complex of theatres and offices.

Pearce's partners in the project have been her IT steering committee of six staff and various outsourcers, led by IBM knowledge management partner CrossWare and Datacom.

Key business benefits identified so far include:

- Being able to capture intellectual property, a capability that has extended the organisation's competitive edge.

- Being able to focus more on business needs. Now that the information flow has been rationalised and quantified, it is easier for staff to identify areas for improvement.

- More complex tracing and reporting of events for the council.

- Closer adherence to policies for human resources, parking and occupational health and safety. Once a policy goes through a review cycle it is placed on to Edge Net. The comprehensive audit trail also makes it easier to clear up issues surrounding accident reporting.

- Establishment of a requests maintenance programme, where requests are recorded and the time taken to fix them is measured and monitored.

- Faster delivery of the most up to date event information.

- Increased communication at The Edge, enabling actions and decisions to be made faster.

The establishment of a centralised information repository has eliminated duplication of communications to a large degree.

Pearce says The Edge employs 86 permanent staff and has a pool of about 300 to call on. At the moment the supervisors are using the portal but Pearce has plans for information kiosks to be scattered around the site. That way, casual staff can have access to generic information about what's happening at The Edge.

"We had a tight timeframe for the project," says Pearce. Inevitably there was some slippage but overall she is happy with how things went.

First to come was the basic portal, consisting of what Pearce describes as the usual staff lists and that sort of thing. "Then we bolted on the contact database, and after that the document store. Finally we added a suite of six small databases we had already been developing. These contained information for things like specifications of foyer heights and jargon."

The jargon explainer is important in an industry rife with its own terms such as gobo and turtle. In case you didn't know, these are lighting terms. "It is very useful to be able to nod sagely and then go back to your desk and look up a piece of jargon," says Pearce. "We've also got tips and tricks recorded on the portal. People can go there to find out how to do things."

The Contact Manager suite was hardly a straightforward effort. It is made up from five major databases that often held the same information — but with limited commonality in the way the fields were presented. Often details failed to match. It was, as Pearce says, a situation that had just grown up that way.

"We had a couple of Access databases, a couple of SQL databases and we also had an Excel database," she says. "We had to put them all on to an intermediary database first, going through a huge cleaning up phase, trying to pull out the duplicates and establishing correct addresses. It was a huge job and took us about three months."

The question of data maintenance has been resolved by allocating ownership for each set of information. The community arts team, for example, maintains its own information and is responsible for the accuracy of its records.

Rules were established around the various data sets. Owners of the patron database are able to identify who should or shouldn't receive various types of information.

School participation, in particular, has been aided by the new systems. The software records what type of events they like to attend and helps to avoid over-booking. Having that data now