CNS /Update Newsletter Feature

Neil Chapin Delivers Service for NERDC and IBM

CNS Document ID: u000504a
Last Updated: 05/01/00

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Neil Chapin remembers when 16K of memory cost $75,000 and was considered a major mainframe upgrade. Chapin, an IBM systems services representative, has been a fixture at NERDC since 1977 and has been with his employer, IBM, since 1970-though many of us at NERDC like to think of him as "our own."

He moved to Gainesville from Albany, GA. "We came to Gainesville, and we really liked what we saw. I've passed up promotions to stay here," he said.

Working for "Big Blue" from his office at NERDC, Chapin has been a big part of the data center's history. He's helped install and remove the last water-cooled mainframe, has helped move racks of disk drives from the downstairs machine room to the newly built upstairs office space and machine room; and in general, helped keep the IBM computers running and NERDC's customers supplied with reliable mainframe computing.

Although he's housed at NERDC, the data center is not his only client. Chapin also oversees some other systems at the University of Florida, two systems in Palatka, and other accounts in town including the Alachua County School Board and the City of Gainesville.
"They like having me here. NERDC gets a quicker response time if someone has a question or a problem. I'm also here as a resource for them," Chapin said.

NERDC Director Ron Schoenau agrees. "It's convenient for us to give up the space to increase the probability that the person who can fix the equipment is here if it breaks. ... Somebody on the premises has a better chance of catching intermittent or potential problems before something fails for real."

A typical day for Chapin includes reviewing system performance; researching products and solutions for his clients; implementing changes; answering questions; and attending change meetings, where system problems and/or upcoming system changes are discussed.

Compared to "the early days," Chapin's typical day is now very different.

"I spend a lot less time fixing things compared to what it used to be 20 years ago. Now it's monitoring and planning. Also the required skill set has changed over the years. Ninety-five percent of it had to be highly skilled to locate problems. That's about 10 % of what I do now. Ninety percent now is planning and maintenance," Chapin said.

Not only is what he does different, but the industry itself has evolved quickly over the last three decades.

"The consideration for upgrading used to be the cost of the processor. Now the cost of the hardware isn't the bulk of the expense anymore. It's how much more it will cost to run your software," he said. Mainframe software packages' licensing costs are dependent on how fast the machine is.

The cost of the machines themselves has also dropped.

"Back then, a huge water-cooled machine cost between $20-25 million. Now, if you pay more than $3 million, it's a really large machine," Chapin said.

Chapin recalls memorable undertakings that involved the upgrade to the water-cooled IBM 9021.

"Our most challenging day was the day we did the upgrade of the 3090 to the 9021, which was the last water-cooled machine here at NERDC. We had cables strung out in the lobby and all over upstairs. I spent weeks on planning and preparation to keep the window where the system was not available as small as possible. We did it in less than 10 hours. There were more than 15 people involved. The key was to have a plan for everyone. My plan was to keep things moving, more like a team coordinator," Chapin said.

His hard work has not gone unnoticed by NERDC staff and administration.

"I've been dealing with IBM maintenance personnel-the people who repair items-for a long time and I've dealt with a lot of them. Neil's far and away the best we've ever had," Schoenau said.
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Two decades later, Chapin still shows up at his NERDC desk several days a week. "I think the thing I like the best about 'working from NERDC' is that I work with very smart people who are nice to work with. It's a nice working environment," Chapin said. And we're glad he's here too. "Keeping a place this size running 24/7, you need someone close at hand, instead of having someone driving in from Jacksonville and getting here in two hours. And two hours is the best case scenario," Schoenau said. Schoenau continued, "I can sum it up in a word: responsiveness."

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