Scott Weikart

A founder of the Institute for Global Communications, Weikart brings networking tools to nonprofit organizations around the world.

By Jerry Lazar

A decade ago, Scott Weikart was designing proprietary local- and wide-area network architectures for Hewlett-Packard Co. He was being paid good money, but he wasn't very happy.

"I felt alienated working in HP labs," says Weikart, whose liberal political views clashed with those of his more button-down coworkers. "I'd get in big arguments over [social issues] that would seem obvious to me."

Today, Weikart, 41, is a cofounder of and a consultant with the Institute for Global Communications (IGC), a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that provides networking tools for international information exchange.

And while Weikart is making considerably less money, he's much happier.

"In leaving HP, I got my work life and values more in line," says Weikart, an activist since his undergraduate days at the University of Illinois.

In an era when "being [politically] left may mean [being] left out," Weikart is bucking a trend. IGC manages computer-mediated communications systems PeaceNet, EcoNet and ConflictNet. Each of these enhanced bulletin board systems (BBS), he says, helps advance a progressive agenda.

PeaceNet, founded in 1986, concentrates on peace and social justice issues throughout the world. EcoNet, which was launched in its current incarnation in 1988, provides information and services for individuals and organizations working for environmental preservation and sustainability. ConflictNet, founded in 1990, serves groups and individuals working for conflict resolution.

IGC's guiding principle is "the vision of creating a tool that people can use to improve the world — a tool that people might not otherwise have in social movements," says Steven Fram, IGC's technical director.

All three BBSs reside in IGC's San Francisco office on a single Sun Microsystems, Inc. SPARCstation II running under SunOS 4.1.1, a version of Unix. The hardware features 64M bytes of random-access memory and 4G bytes of storage. It uses a Unix version of Notes File, which is computer conferencing software originally developed at the University of Illinois in the 1970s. Notes File allows more than 100 users to access the BBSs simultaneously.

Using Notes File, however, puts IGC out on a technological limb. Although Control Data Corp. briefly tried to market it, Notes File "hasn't been heavily supported," Weikart acknowledges. "But it's more important for us to have functional software than to have software that most people are using."

The three BBSs' 6,000 users in 84 countries connect to the host via direct dial-up connections. They also gain access through a number of X.25 public packet switched networks, including Telenet and SprintNet.

Subscribers pay a onetime sign-up fee of $15 and a $10 monthly fee. Within the U.S., connection time costs $10 per hour during peak time (Monday through Friday, 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.) and $5 per off-peak hour.

Users can participate in several hundred public forums on topics including global warming, human rights, disarmament and environmental education. Services include access to alternative news services, including newsletters from all over the world, as well as electronic mail, fax and telex capabilities.

The typical user, according to Weikart, may be a staff member of a nonprofit or government group or a committed volunteer working for a local peace or environmental group.

"We don't really market to corporations," Fram says. At least one oil company, however, uses it to check the pulse of the environmental movement.

As a nonprofit entity, IGC is truly computing on a shoestring. The company depends on donations and user fees to keep going.

Nevertheless, not only have Weikart and IGC been able to create and maintain a national nonprofit network environment, they have also succeeded in an area where many commercial ventures fail: They've established an international networking presence.

IGC is at the hub of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), a worldwide federation of 10 networked BBSs providing similar services in countries such as Australia, Germany, Nicaragua and Russia. These BBSs, each running on a Reduced Instruction Set Computing- or 80386-based computer, interchange as much as 1M byte of data per day.

According to Weikart, the 10 APC BBSs communicate using three options.

"We may use international phone calls with high-speed Telebit Corp. modems, call an X.25 packet assembler/disassembler or communicate over the Internet," he says.

Using these options, IGC ensures that all new information on each APC BBS is propagated to the other host BBSs between three and 24 times per day.

Weikart learned about computer conferencing at the University of Illinois. There, he worked on Plato, an early networked educational system that ran courseware accessible by students around the country. "That was the model I used for the computer conferencing on PeaceNet," Weikart says.

After college, Weikart took a job at HP, but he was never really comfortable being the office socialist.

His after-hours work, however, was another matter. "I was allowed to let volunteer-based nonprofits use the computers after hours," he says. These included women's groups, gay rights organizations and others.

"I found there was a great need among nonprofit organizations [for a data communications tool]," he adds. "When Unix became available on microcomputers, I saw the real opportunity to provide sophisticated computing to nonprofit organizations."

The direct result of that realization was Community Data Processing (CDP), a nonprofit consultancy founded by 10 technical professionals, including Weikart. In 1986, CDP and two other nonprofit organizations established IGC to manage the EcoNet and PeaceNet.

Armed with its first computer (a Motorola, Inc. 68000 machine) and communications software, IGC began its mission: to recruit both information providers and users.

"We looked for groups doing progressive work and asked them, 'Could you use E-mail, conferencing or better communications?'" Weikart says.

IGC grew naturally from a local to a national to an international presence, Weikart recalls. "The outreach for PeaceNet was in the U.S., but from the very beginning, we had people logging on from around the world," he says.

Through the activities of PeaceNet, IGC encountered the operators of GreenNet, an environmentally oriented user network based in England. "They borrowed a computer like the one we were using for PeaceNet," Weikart says. "So I said, 'Why don't we give you our software?'"

The next thing Weikart knew, he was flying to London with a controller card, magnetic tapes and a user manual. Within a week, the PeaceNet and GreenNet hosts were communicating. "It was so easy because we based it on Unix," he says. "We had Unix-to-Unix Copy Program and UUCP Mail and Notes File; that was about it."

IGC's overseas affiliates are typically nonprofit organizations. "They're people who've worked in the activist community," Weikart explains. The end result is exactly what multinational companies look for in their overseas subsidiaries.

In some ways, IGC resembles an entrepreneurial start-up industry. "We certainly pay ourselves like start-ups," Weikart says with a laugh, "only without the stock options."

But the level of commitment to IGC does resemble a new technology company — or a volunteer organization.

"There's a level of scrounging here," he says. "There's the philosophy of making do."

The resulting system may not be pretty, but it does the job. And the job is one that needs doing. "The real reason Scott wants to be where he is is some form of idealism," says Tracy Larabee, one of Weikart's former HP colleagues, who is now professor of computer science at the University of California, Santa Cruz. "Some people move away from academia because they want to make money. Some move back because they want to make a difference. Scott needs to make a concrete difference — to affect what's going on in the world right now."

Lazar is a free-lance writer based in Cliffside Park, N.J.

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