

Suburban Journals

POKIN AROUND: What's so great about NISC? A lot, says Computerworld

By **Steve Pokin**

Saturday, July 24, 2010 3:09 AM CDT

Vern Dosch, CEO of National Information Solutions Cooperative, with an office in Lake Saint Louis, slips his kayak into the Missouri River in North Dakota and paddles to the far shore. He is in transit from Bismarck to Mandan.

He leaves the kayak on the property of a fellow NISC employee and hops on his bicycle. It's three miles to the NISC office in Mandan. This is how Dosch, 57, commutes a couple times a year.



ROY SYKES PHOTO - Exterior of NISC campus in Lake Saint Louis.

The company's board of directors once suggested he move to St. Charles County. That was when NISC constructed a 132,000-square-foot building in 2005 near Lake Saint Louis Boulevard and Highway 40-61. Dosch said thanks but no thanks.

He's a North Dakota native. Went to college there. He's married. His three children grew up in Bismarck. He doesn't mind the winters. Basically, he didn't want to move. And he didn't. Instead, he spends a week every month in Lake Saint Louis, residing at an extended-stay hotel.

Why am I telling you about Vern Dosch?

First, because the personal importance he places on balancing life and work is reflected in the way NISC operates. Second, and this is the reason I'm writing this story, in June I received a news release stating Computerworld ranked NISC 22nd in

the nation in the magazine's annual Best Places to Work in Information Technology. No. 1 was USAA, a San Antonio-based financial services company.

NISC is ranked No. 3 in the nation for businesses with fewer than 2,500 employees. The company has 780; they're evenly divided between Mandan and Lake Saint Louis.

The ranking is no fluke. Computerworld has ranked NISC in the top 100 eight times in nine years.

I had known nothing about NISC other than it once had an office on the North Service Road in St. Peters. I drove by it on my way to work. The building is now the Army Reserve Center.

"In Mandan, NISC is a big fish in a little pond," says vice president Jan Bryzeal. "Here in St. Charles County, we're a little fish in a big pond and most people have never heard of us."

Bryzeal, 50, of Fenton, is VP of people services. You probably work at a place with a "human resources" department. At NISC they didn't like the sound of "human resources." It sounded too corporate, a little "too sterile," Bryzeal says.

No suits and ties

Rick Willmann, 57, has been with NISC 37 years, which dates to before the 2000 merger of North Central Data Processing in Bismarck and Central Area Data Processing in St. Peters. He oversees a mail room in Lake Saint Louis that sends out 6 million pieces a month, mostly utility bills.

He is not an IT employee but says if Computerworld had surveyed everyone at NISC it would have gotten the same result.

"It's a very relaxed atmosphere," he says. "We don't wear suits and ties to work, which makes it a real enjoyable environment."

On this day Willmann sports khaki shorts, a turquoise knit shirt and running shoes. He typically runs 4-7 miles during lunch.

The building not only has showers, but a women's fitness room, a weight room, an outdoor one-third mile walking/running trail, a room with a ping pong table, a library for recreational reading, a Wii gaming system and two "family rooms" with TVs.

The families rooms are where employees with sick children can work with their child present, or briefly attend a meeting - leaving the child in the family room - and then scoot back home.

On the day I was there a computer programmer with a bad back was in one of the rooms, on a sofa, working from her laptop.

"After 37 years I enjoy coming to work every day," Willmann says. "It seems like there's something new and exciting every day. The industry of software for utilities is moving so fast. What worked last year might not work this year."

Don't call us 'vendor'

NISC creates software for rural utility cooperatives. NISC is a cooperative, too. The 550 small companies NISC serves are members and owners. NISC develops their software and handles their data processing and billing.

"If you want to insult us, call us a 'vendor,'" says Dosch. Instead, he says, NISC is a "partner."

"We have great technical people," he says. "I would put them up against any of the people in Boston or the Silicon Valley."

Dosch realizes talented IT people are in demand. They're hard to retain. Yet NISC loses only 3 percent of its IT staff a year, a low figure for the industry.

Regarding salary, NISC regularly hires an outside company to determine competitive wages for different positions. The company sets salaries at 100 percent of that figure. These days NISC pays a programmer just out of college \$45,000 to \$55,000.

The company focuses on benefits, Dosch says, which typically are set at 125 percent of the industry average.

New employees have complete family medical coverage at no cost. They start with 16 vacation days a year. The company will pay \$15,000 for employees with a two-year degree who want to pursue a four-year degree. Similarly, it will pay \$15,000 if an employee with a bachelor's seeks a master's.

The smart grid

This is a great time to be in the business of developing utility software, Dosch says. It's the dawn of the era of the 'smart grid.' Utility companies no longer send a person once a month to read a "dumb meter" that provides a sliver of information - how much power you used last month.

Instead, today's smart digital meters capture data, making it possible for consumers and utilities to track energy use by the hour, or, if desired, by every 15 minutes.

NISC also handles utility bills for major retailers like Wal-Mart and JCPenney. These companies find it easier to contract with NISC to do the work of tracking and paying hundreds of utility bills for stores across the nation.

Large retailers compare energy use at their various stores. (There's a way to normalize for climate, Dosch says.) Today's store manager is evaluated not only on the traditional measure of profitability but also on the store's "carbon footprint," he says.

The ability to put a microscope to energy use means utilities will soon charge lower rates for off-peak use.

"Utility companies are going to come to you and say that if you're using electricity to wash your clothes at 6 p.m. that if you wait until 10 p.m. your charge per kilowatt hour will be dramatically less," Dosch says.

Beyond compensation

Employees can contribute to a benevolence fund managed by fellow employees. It pays for flowers, for example, for funerals and births. The money also can help employees who fall on hard times. The company matches employee benevolence contributions, as it matched worker contributions to the American Red Cross after the earthquake in Haiti.

This year NISC will start a quarterly pulse survey of employees. It will consist of a dozen questions on topics such as: What's your job satisfaction? What do you think of the direction of the company?

After my interview with Dosch, he encouraged me to talk to employees I might randomly meet during my tour of the building.

Two programmers chat in a cubicle. I ask them why NISC, according to Computerworld, is such a good place to work.

"It's a great work environment," says Robert Moore, 35, of St. Charles.

"It's the people I work with," says Steve Carrel, 26, of O'Fallon.

John Alls, 30, of Troy, has been with NISC 12 years. "What attracted me originally was the benefits," he says.

But now that he has a wife and three daughters other things matter, too.

"There are a lot of opportunities for growth and for further hands-on training," he says. "You have a really good work/life balance."

He took the Computerworld survey. "One of the questions they ask is how loyal you feel," he says. "A lot of people here feel very loyal to NISC. And the reason is because they take good care of us."

Steve Pokin is a columnist for the Suburban Journals. He can be reached at spokin@yourjournal.com or by phone at 636-946-6111, ext. 239. An audio version of the column is on the Journal website, under videos, at suburbanjournals.stltoday.com/stcharles.