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Christchurch IT scene: Orion Health opens up shop

Demand in the health IT sector sees expansion down south for fast growing technology company

By Sarah Putt, Auckland | Friday, 11 February, 2011

When Orion Health CEO Ian McCrae told *Computerworld* the company is opening up a development shop in Christchurch we asked who was the best person to talk to about it. "Developer Jeff," he replied.

This turned out to be Jeff Wilkinson, who has been lured away from a six-year stint teaching secondary school maths, to establish Orion's development in Christchurch. Previously Wilkinson worked for HP and prior to that Compaq and the Digital Equipment Applications Development Centre (the latter two gobbled up by HP in the 1980s and 1990s).

Massive demand in the health IT sector is helping fuel the expansion of one of New Zealand's fastest growing IT companies and Orion is having to expand its development team to keep up. It has 130 developers in Auckland, a development centre in Canberra, with outsourced work in Auckland and India.

We met in Joe's Cafe in what appeared to be the only unscathed building on a stretch of Cashel Steet in central Christchurch. Buildings on either side had either crumbled, or were the process of being knocked down following the earthquake in September. But the cafe was standing and serving a good brew.

Wilkinson had just signed the lease on a building on a corner of Hagley Park and is in the process of conducting second interviews for staff. He is after an initial team of 10, which he is hoping to grow to 30 by the end of the year.



"We're looking at development team leads, software engineers, testing staff project

management staff, business analysts – the whole spectrum,” he says. “We’ll do the whole cycle here. Instead of being part of the project team, which is working in Auckland, we actually split a piece of the software off so its self contained and take responsibility from beginning to end.”

Wilkinson is pleased with the response to his recruitment drive, and when asked to describe the Christchurch IT scene he doesn’t hesitate. “Robust and innovative. It’s not full of internal IT department staff who are struggling along. There’s a lot of really exciting stand alone or parts of software houses that are doing really interesting or innovative things.”

Christchurch has, according to Wilkinson, a stable workforce, bolstered by immigrants from Europe seeking a lifestyle change. He also notes the three tertiary institutions – Canterbury University, Lincoln University and the Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology – do a good job in producing graduates for the IT industry.

As for the earthquake’s impact on the IT industry, Wilkinson says it has been minimal. The real impact has been social, not economic. He described what happened in his own house, located 10km from the epicentre, and how he thought it was going to fall down around him but that it remained standing, although cracks have appeared along the walls. It was a story, with variations, I was to hear repeated throughout my visit.

** This is the first in a series of articles about the Christchurch IT scene. On Monday Computerworld looks at the work of the Canterbury Development Corporation. In the meantime, check out the details of the next [Fry Up debate to be held in Christchurch on 1 March](#), the moot is: 'South Islanders will be the most innovative when it comes to fast fibre networks'.*

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