

Data Center News:

Monsanto rebuilds rather than retrofitting old data center

By Luke Meredith, News Writer
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Stuck with a 30-year-old, retrofitted data center bleeding dollars, Monsanto Co., took a hard look at its IT future and demanded it be cheaper than its past.

The St. Louis-based agricultural company plans to construct a new data center on its world headquarters campus, replacing its current server farm, which has occupied two floors in one of its office buildings since the mid-'70s.

Data center overgrowth like Monsanto's has become increasingly commonplace in an age where business needs are shifting over to the IT sphere more than ever. Many data centers are finding themselves suddenly overextended, bogged down by server sprawl, a jungle of wires and air conditioning ill-equipped for a jam-packed closet.

Charles King, principal analyst for Hayward-Calif.-based Pund-IT Research, feels that many data centers now look like awkward old ranches, with a farmhouse surrounded by several auxiliary buildings that wind up looking out of place. The decision to renovate, expand or relocate is one data center managers must decide for themselves, but King warns that unless they want their server farm to look and run like an old dairy farm, they'd better attack the question head on. ((Content component not found.))

"What companies need to do is constantly reevaluate, or at least plan, an honest evaluation of their data center needs and how those are being met by their current infrastructure on a year-by-year basis," King said. "At some point you have to ask yourself if I keep adding on, am I creating as many problems as the one I'm trying to solve."

Over the past two decades, Monsanto's IT needs have grown substantially. The company is heavily involved in the biotechnical aspects of crop growth and thus requires a platform that can handle significant genomic tasks, among other things, not just internal e-mail and database applications. But stuck between two floors on their campus, Monsanto was forced to retrofit its server farm on multiple occasions just to keep up with the company's skyrocketing IT demands.

For Monsanto, it was a case where consolidating its electrical and mechanical equipment was a must. A small team of Monsanto employees has worked since late 2004 to try and determine the most appropriate solution for upgrading the company's current data center,

and that team discovered that simply retrofitting yet again would actually cost 20% more than building a data center from scratch.

Like many companies who step back and take a good, hard look at their IT future, Monsanto felt the best way to move forward was to stop spending capital simply to keep their past up to date.

"The way the [current] building was configured ... it was more a concern of age," said Lori Fisher, Monsanto's director of external communications. "We know what our needs are today ... hopefully we'll have built something that will give us more flexibility in the future."

Monsanto's new data center, which will deploy the same technology -- Unix, Linux and Windows applications -- will be housed in a 40,000-square-foot building and cost an estimated \$21 million. The company plans to convert the space currently housing their IT infrastructure into office and conference space.

Groundbreaking is scheduled for early 2006, and the company hopes to have the data center occupied as early as the summer of 2007.