

SURREY

WORKPLACE | People spending a third of job time on email, study finds



- 11.7** Number of hours spent each week by a “typical” knowledge worker processing email at work, according to a new Carleton University study
- 5.3** Number of hours spent processing work email from home, for a total of 17 hours or a third of the work week
- 86** Number of work-related emails sent or received at work each day
- 25** Number of work-related emails sent or received at home each day
- 3** Number of days missed in a six-month period due to emotional fatigue

SOURCE: CARLETON UNIVERSITY

Tech pioneers keep data software firm safe and sound

TECHNOLOGY | Surrey company goes from household startup to city staple

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Back in 1993, Don Murray and Dale Lutz could be found feverishly toiling in the spare rooms of their homes in Surrey, each labouring separately on a common task.

The two entrepreneurs, who both have backgrounds in computer science and had met while working for MacDonald, Dettwiler and Associates Ltd., were putting together a bid on a Ministry of Forests request for software that would allow forestry companies to easily exchange maps with the provincial government. It was an urgent request because, back in the early 1990s, the data-sharing process was painstaking and took hours.

Murray and Lutz would get on the phone to each other every day to discuss progress.

“This was pre-Internet,” said Lutz. “I remember I’d get excited when the delivery man would come to my door because I could actually talk to somebody.”

Murray and Lutz’s hard work paid off. They came up with the software the government was looking for – and were the lowest bidder.

“We were just two young guys,” Murray said. “We bid against some pretty big players, and our bid was, I want to say, a tenth of the next one. We don’t really know because we had zero overhead – we were just two guys in our rooms.”

Murray added they won the bid



Don Murray and Dale Lutz started Safe Software out of their spare rooms in Surrey. Now they’ve become a community staple and are set to move into a new building at Innovation Boulevard | ROB KRUYT

for a very simple reason: “we created a project where they could just push a couple buttons and get that map in all its glory.”

In the process the two created software that not only solved the problem of how to quickly access government forestry maps, but also could be used for a variety of other related computer tasks. Now commonly known as an FME (feature manipulation engine), Murray and Lutz’s software blueprint has since been expanded and put to use in multiple industries.

Murray and Lutz called their two-man company **Safe Software**, and they soon moved out of their spare rooms and into an office space while adding

additional staff. Murray and Lutz are co-CEOs; the former is also president while the latter’s other job title is vice-president of development.

The new company proceeded to nab several other government forestry contracts and even branched out to work for companies in Switzerland and Sweden. Starting the company in the mid-’90s meant they got their pick of the litter when it came to domain names.

“The footnote is we could have had any domain name, and for 50 bucks we got safe.com,” Lutz said. “We continue to be asked to sell it, but that’s another story and we have no intention.”

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DON MURRAY
CO-CEO AND PRESIDENT, SAFE SOFTWARE

Describing what the company’s FME does, Murray said the technology is best explained using a plumbing metaphor.

“You have taps and fridges, and we build the data pipes,” he said. “The end points in this case is software so it shouldn’t matter what kind of software people are using. Our end goal is allow the person using that software to be able to get access to the data they want in the way they want, so they can immediately use it.”

The two also use the Swiss Army knife analogy in describing what Safe Software does, as the software can be utilized with a variety of applications from **Amazon Web Services** and

Microsoft Excel to Google Maps.

The company has built an impressive resumé since starting up and now has a staff of about 140 at its Newton location in Surrey and more than 20,000 customers in around 100 countries. The company’s client list ranges from **DeepOcean** and the **University of Oxford** to the **City of San Jose** and **Shell Canada**.

One of Safe Software’s clients is the **California Earthquake Authority**. The FME Desktop software automatically kicks into gear when an earthquake strikes, putting information together into an Excel document and generating reports for the authority’s claim director about households that could be affected by the natural disaster. The software streamlines the process of sorting out places that may need to make insurance claims due to earthquake damage.

The company is now focused primarily on licensing out the software, and is set to move into a new space in downtown Surrey next year in the Health and Technology District’s City Centre 2 building at Innovation Boulevard. Lutz said they’re excited to join a downtown core south of the Fraser River in the fast-developing technology hub.

“We’ve never grown out of our means,” he added. “We’ve grown organically; I guess bootstrapping is the other term people use. We’ve just had slow, steady growth, and slow, steady growth after 23 years starts to be a pretty big operation.” ■



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