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SPECIAL FEATURES

Canada's first host

The Province

Jim Jamieson The Province

At 47, John Demco seems a little young to be a pioneer.

But the University of B.C. computing facilities manager had a pivotal role in the formation of the Internet in Canada and has managed Canada's top-level domain since its inception in 1987.

In fact, if Demco and a few of his colleagues had been of a different mindset, it would be .cdn instead of .ca.

"In May of 1987, we (UBC) got the authority for the .ca domain from Jon Postel of the Internet Assigned Number Authority," recalls Demco.

"They had decided on the ISO 3166 standard, which lists countries by their abbreviation. The standard was .ca for Canada but we were concerned it was going to be mistaken for California."

Demco and a few of his UBC cohorts talked it over and, although Postel offered to let Canada use .cdn, they decided to stick with .ca.

At the time, with only a few hundred hosts, the decision seemed less than earth-shattering but, 13 years later, the wired world boasts nearly 100,000 registered .ca domains.

That's likely to explode Nov. 1, when Demco cedes his stewardship of the registry to the government-run Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA) and new, relaxed rules make it easier to acquire multiple top-level domain names.

Demco says the numbers haven't surprised him but the way the Internet has become such an integral part of everyday life has.

When he registered the first .ca domain on Jan. 12, 1988 -- for the University of Prince Edward Island, which became upei.ca. while UBC became one of the next half-dozen the following day -- the only customers were educational institutions and government departments.

That year, just 60 were registered and the total in 1992 was 450 but, once the Internet started to become commercial in the 1992-94 era, the numbers started going through the roof.



Last May alone, there were 5,000 registrations and this year there have been more than 27,000.

"We had designed the namespace back before it was recognized you might need a domain name for a product. When the commercialization began, it became only a matter of time before something had to give."

What also gave was any thought Demco might have had of spare time, as the registry began to demand more and more hours a week from him.

It quickly became a non-paying second job that exceeded 40 hours a week.

But Demco may well receive a windfall in recognition of his years of volunteer work. CIRA will pay UBC \$4.348 million for the transfer, and Demco may get a significant portion of the compensation.

The money will be paid over time, though, as CIRA collects \$20 a year per registration. The .ca registration had been free of charge.

"I don't want to make too much of it. There are lots of people who do lots of volunteer work and they're completely unsung.

"I don't see what I'm doing as being special in that regard.

"It's appropriate for UBC to negotiate compensation and that I should get a share but I never expected to get huge financial gain from this."

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