

Networking grad makes the trains run on time

Provides desk top support for CN in Atlantic region

Charles Gervais, a 22-year-old native of Grand Falls, N.B., helps make the trains run on time in Atlantic Canada. Since August 2002, he's worked as a systems administrator in Moncton, N.B., providing desktop support for Canadian National's offices in Moncton and its line points throughout the Atlantic region.

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Gervais is part of an outsourcing 'triangle'. CN outsources its desktop support and some server work (but not the infrastructure of the network) to EDS Canada, which in turn subcontracts to Thinkpath, a local I.T. services firm. It was Thinkpath that hired Gervais on a renewable six-month contract. "It's a little bit complicated," he says. "Working for Thinkpath was my way into EDS."

Gervais was hired one month after he completed New Brunswick Community College's course in Network Design and Administration, which encompasses the Cisco Networking Academy program. (He had previously graduated from NBCC's Computer System Technician program.)

The Networking Academy program teaches students in Canada and around the world the fundamentals of networking. They learn how to design, build and maintain networks capable of supporting national and global organizations. Combining online learning and testing with instructor-led training and hands-on laboratory exercises, students apply what they learn in class by working on actual networks.

"I don't regret anything about taking that course," says Gervais. "It was very hands-on. The labs were excellent, and I learned a lot from them. Having taken a course written by Cisco was also an asset in getting hired. In fact, my employer asked me if I was CCNA certified. I wasn't, but I'm going to do it. I'm going to sit for the CCNA exam in a few weeks. I think that will open up more opportunities for me, especially in network administration."

Gervais' boss is Greg Muise, a network administrator for EDS Canada working on the CN contract. He says that, while Gervais is not working with switches and routers in his current job, the Cisco course provided him with useful background information and "the ability to think and reason in a logical fashion."

Moreover, adds Muise, "When it comes to troubleshooting, knowing some of the conditions of networking, and some of the problems involved, helps—because everything here is tied together in the WAN environment, so one desktop problem may be related to a server, it may be related to a network problem as well, so that knowledge does come into play."

Gervais appreciates the variety in his current job. "CN uses a lot of programs," he says. "I have to get to know them all a little bit. There are always new ones. Knowing all the programs, making them work on the network and troubleshooting them—that's the challenge."

Nonetheless, Gervais says his networking skills have given him the confidence to do much more than he's doing now. He envisions an eventual move to Ottawa, where he hopes to become a network administrator within five years. "That's what I went to college for, and that's what I like," he says. "I just need some experience before catching that bus."