

Mellower Microsoft now clicks with its rivals

13 May 2015, by Matt Day, The Seattle Times

Todd McKinnon, the chief executive of a San Francisco technology startup, has no illusions about how the Microsoft of an earlier era would have viewed his firm.

"Microsoft has traditionally been this 'kill everybody who competes with us' company," McKinnon said.

The Seattle-area software giant received that reputation during decades of fierce - and, at times, as a federal judge ruled, illegally monopolistic - competition. Its path toward becoming the world's largest software company was marked by complaints of strong-arm tactics from rivals such as Sun Microsystems and Apple.

But Microsoft, stung by the rise of mobile and Web-based computing not dependent on its Windows operating system, has recently shown a softer side to rivals in Silicon Valley and elsewhere.

In the past year, Microsoft has made it easier to link its software to that of rivals Salesforce.com, Dropbox and Docker.

The company the past six months bought a series of startups that make applications for Google and Apple smartphones, and released free versions of Office for those platforms.

And after Yahoo's CEO voiced discontent with a 10-year agreement to use Microsoft's Web search technology, the companies last month announced a revised deal that, among other things, gave Yahoo more flexibility.

Okta, McKinnon's startup, develops software to help businesses manage their employees' access to Web-based programs. It has grown to more than 450 employees in part by plugging customers into Microsoft's Web-based version of Office.

The company faced what could have been a mortal threat last year when Microsoft introduced a product that essentially performed the same task as Okta's software. But Microsoft didn't shut

McKinnon's team out of Office, he said.

"They're really different now," McKinnon said. Okta in March announced the opening of a Seattle office, hiring 10 employees initially with the aim of further integrating the company's products into Microsoft's.

'WE FEEL REALLY WELCOMED'

Much of the shift in tone followed Satya Nadella's February 2014 promotion to Microsoft chief executive.

Some Microsoft employees cite Nadella's years of experience as an executive in units used to playing an insurgent role, like Web search, cloud computing and server tools. Trying to get traction with Microsoft's Bing fledgling search engine, for example, more naturally lent itself more to deals with other companies than running the company's juggernaut Windows PC franchise.

"Scroogled," Microsoft's campaign that criticized Google's services in a style reminiscent of political attack ads, was quietly phased out. Its website this year began redirecting users to a site that simply compared Microsoft's services with those of rivals.

Four months into Nadella's tenure, Microsoft and Salesforce.com, a maker of business software, announced a partnership to link some of their products. That was a turnaround from the years when Salesforce's outspoken CEO, Marc Benioff, traded barbs with Steve Ballmer, Nadella's predecessor.

"We feel really welcomed," Adam Seligman, a Salesforce vice president who oversees developer relations, said in an interview.

The companies last month hosted events in San Francisco and Los Angeles to introduce Microsoft and Salesforce programmers to each other, Seligman said. Then, Microsoft and Salesforce announced another integration of their products, a

tool that pulls data from Microsoft's Excel into Salesforce's analytics software.

SHIFT CAME QUICKLY

Microsoft went out of its way at its recent Build developer conference to advertise such outreach to those using technology built by others. Executives unveiled versions of Microsoft's developer software for Apple's Mac and open-source Linux, as well as a tool to convert applications coded for Google and Apple mobile devices to Windows.

Rob Lefferts, a program manager at Microsoft, took the stage at Build with Nadella to reveal a program for developers to build programs on top of Office applications that could be used on the Windows, Apple iOS and Web platforms.

Lefferts said in an interview that some developers he talks to are taken aback by Microsoft's shift in tone. "The thing that still surprised them is how fast this attitude has turned into reality, delivering real stuff," Lefferts said. "We have changed pretty fast."

WILL IT PAY OFF?

Developers say it's too soon to tell whether Microsoft's year of bold moves will increase interest in Microsoft platforms in the long run, or whether some of the technology tweaks will be as easy to pull off as the company indicates.

"In cases like this, a lot of times clients will call me and say, 'We've heard Microsoft will let us do X,' but it turns out it's not quite that easy to do," said a developer who builds programs for clients on Microsoft, Apple and Google products.

But for now, the moves are at least making Microsoft a more interesting topic of conversation in territory that's home to its biggest rivals.

"The tone is new," said a San Francisco Bay Area-based developer who has worked with Microsoft for decades. "They realized that putting up walls was not winning them many friends."

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