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Mainframe moaners - Platform - Column

George Schussel

At many downsizing conferences and seminars, I have had opportunities to meet IS staffers dealing with the issue of downsizing. Among this audience, there is typically a group of old friends: the mainframe bigots. These folks are absolutely against any movement towards distributing and downsizing applications; they love their "Big Iron."

I have compiled a list of the basic excuses I hear muttered time and time again by mainframe enthusiasts. So, when the time comes, with this list, you will be armed with informed arguments powerful enough to overcome any bigot's excuse.

Excuses one and two: PCs during the day are turned on and off while mainframes aren't; and, PC MIPS just aren't comparable to mainframe MIPS.

The first excuse is true for standalone, PC-based personal computing. However, downsizing is all about porting mainframe software and mainframe thinking onto PC networks. In the 1990s, the "personal" aspect will somewhat leave PCs. They will be left on constantly, and work will be allocated to the idle workstations from the network operating system.

The second part of this objection, that PC MIPS aren't the same as mainframe MIPS, is true but irrelevant. The comparison comes out so much in favor of the PC workstation that a few hundred per cent one way or the other won't be noticeable in the real, day-to-day world.

Excuse three: MIPS don't really matter in "real" data processig.

This objection is so wrong that it's normally only used by people desperate to avoid the inevitable.

I like to take the excuse head on. I usually start with a quote from consultant Frank Dzubeck who, in a recent round-table discussion, said to one of his detractors, "Let me explain this in terms you can understand. You're wrong!" Once I've got my adversaries to admit that database processing constitutes "real" data processing, they're a goner, because I can cite several examples where speed in database processing is more directly correlated to processor speed and memory than to disk access speeds and transfer rates.

Excuse four: spreading data around on PCs is too risky, and LANs don't have adequate security.

If you are concerned about security issues, my advice is to downsize to a client-server, database management system (DBMS) technology. Sybase, Digital Equipment Corp., Gupta, Borland and others sell true client-server DBMS products that offer mainframe security and integrity on PC and workstation platforms.

Excuse five: I've already downsized onto minicomputers and AS/400s

The AS/400 is undoubtedly the most popular minicomputer platform for vertical, business-oriented solutions. IBM, along with DEC and Hewlett-Packard, aggressively sells the machine as a downsized target for customers who want to move away from MVS types of environments.

The problem is that proprietary environments limit the hardware choices a customer has. In the past, proprietary environments didn't always limit the software choices for the user -- DEC VMS users and IBM MVS users have had somewhat of a diversity. In the future, open systems like Windows, OS/2 and Unix will offer a much wider choice of software.

In the meantime, people must choose the combination of environments and applications that make the most business sense.

Excuse six: We need application packages -- nothing is available for client-server environments.

If your mainframe applications are satisfactory, an interface to client-server computing is probably more productive than trying to replace the entire mainframe environment. In this case, SQL server gateway technologies are what you should investigate. If you write an application that interfaces your current database to an SQL database on a PC server, then a network can be used to bring many client-server benefits without trashing the mainframe database.

Client-server approaches and networks are an inevitable part of most future computing environments. The smart IS manager will figure out how to keep the best parts of the ageing time-shared application base alive for another few years while taking advantage of better and cheaper technologies afforded by downsizing.

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