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DB & C/S World - Debate Focuses On NC Merits

TORONTO, ONTARIO, CANADA, 1997 APR 16 (NB) -- By Grant Buckler. In the press and speakers' room before the session billed as "The Great Debate: Has The Internet Killed Client/Server?" George Schussel, whose Digital Consulting Inc. runs the Database and Client/Server World conference going on this week, was overheard telling some panelists that "The point of this debate is just to have....fun." They did that, though they didn't talk very much about the impact of the Internet on client/server.

The session concentrated instead on an admittedly related topic: the relative merits of network computers (NCs) versus conventional personal computers. With a panel including participants from Microsoft Corp., Oracle Corp., and Netscape Communications Corp. -- all of which have strong positions on this subject -- the discussion was bound to get entertaining.

The exchange that got the biggest audience reaction started when Schussel, acting as moderator, asked "What value will a used NC be?" Norm Judah, director of enterprise program management at Microsoft, replied: "A doorstep?" And Netscape Vice-President Kevin Fitzgerald, picking up on the theme of PC obsolescence that ran through the debate, retorted that "It'll be a cheaper one."

The panelists chose up sides in the NC versus PC debate early and predictably, with Fitzgerald and Chuck Rozwat, senior vice-president of the database server division at Oracle, spearheading the NC side, while Judah and Robert Epstein, executive vice-president and founder of Oracle rival Sybase Inc., championed the PC. IBM Fellow Don Haderle, also vice-president of data management architecture and technology at Big Blue, was somewhere in the middle.

Epstein ridiculed the idea of the NC by arguing that unreliable communications will mean NCs need their own hard disks to ensure they can be used when the network is down. Since they are also expected to have powerful processors, a good deal of memory, high-quality displays and the like, he said they will be essentially the same as personal computers but incompatible with them.

Rozwat retorted that the cost of the hardware is not the issue; the issue is the cost of support, which NCs will reduce. He argued that business users are tired of constantly upgrading personal computers to keep up with the mounting demands of new software, and NCs will break that cycle. But Judah questioned that view, saying it presumes that "we've invented all the software we're ever going to invent."

Judah also gave a chilling glimpse of where software development might be going when he noted at the outset of the discussion that experience with the Internet is affecting computer users' expectations. "We've now become incredibly tolerant of things that we wouldn't accept before," he said, meaning frequently glacial response times. "As application designers, it's given us a lot of flexibility."

Haderle's view of NCs was that they are a replacement for dumb terminals. "I don't think of the NC as the PC coming down, I think of it -- I'm IBM -- I think of it as a 3270 going up."

Rozwat also raised the argument that the NC is a key to bringing computing to the masses, by offering low-cost, easy-to-use devices. Schussel played devil's advocate by suggesting that setting up networks of devices running Java applets in rural Africa is a ridiculous idea. Maybe, Rozwat replied, but doing so in schools, whose increasing budget constraints make high-powered PCs hard to afford, is not.

Bringing the debate back to its central theme at the close, Schussel observed that "I think client/server is not dead," but is moving into a new generation of development that will incorporate Internet technologies.

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