

Downsizing has arrived; MIS forced to change in effort to cut costs - management information systems - Client/Server Computing - Field Report

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Some call the process downsizing. Others label it rightsizing. Whatever the process is called, observers say, the age of network and distributed computing has arrived.

The long-expected shift from time-shared mainframe-class computers to network-based computing with clients and servers has finally become a major industry trend during the 1990s.

This comes as no surprise to many observers, who noted that MIS departments reached the point, during the late 1980s, where there was no choice but to cut costs.

"Previous new technologies talked about increased capability; downsizing is the first technology I have seen that talks about cutting cost," said George Schussel, president of Digital Consulting, Inc., Andover, Mass., during the recent DCI-sponsored Downsizing Expo in Anaheim, Calif.

"The terms 'downsizing' and 'open systems' are almost synonymous," contended Schussel. "It's hard to imagine doing one without the other. In downsizing, hardware environments are open--DOS, OS/2, Novell Inc.'s NetWare and Banyan Systems Inc.'s Vines run on many brands of hardware. Software is open, too. There is a choice of different tool sets working on different databases. What is sold is not proprietary; it's one's own preference."

However, such a wide choice can add another set of problems, observers note, While the theory of downsizing to cut costs may be an ideal solution, the wrong scheme can be disheartening, more expensive and chaotic to an organization.

Though many MIS shops may desire to downsize immediately, the process is usually lengthy because the installed operational systems keep the business running. Therefore, officials must carefully select key pieces of technology. For example, MIS must decide among a host of so-called open operating systems and connectivity standards that can be used to create an enterprise-wide, network-based computing organization.

Jeffrey Tash, president of Database Decisions, a Newton, Mass. consulting firm said, "DP must synthesize two enabling technologies: databases and networks."

According to Tash, MIS departments must also look to change three key processes--batch processing, transaction processing and end-user interactive processing. Batch and OLTP must become enterprise computing. Technology should be acquired to shift time-sharing and personal computing applications to client/server and cooperative processing, Tash said.

"It's essential to have an application architecture in a client/server cooperative processing

environment," he said.

MIS departments also face a difficult choice among the various graphical user interfaces, such as Presentation Manager, Windows 3.0 and OSF/Motif. These users are forced to predict which will become a de facto standard, as IBM and Microsoft continue to push their own interfaces into MIS.

Meanwhile, users must choose between the various "standard" versions of SQL, including IBM's Enterprise Data Architecture, and the different Ansi SQL or OEM SQL implementations from Oracle Corp., Redwood City, Calif.; Computer Associates International Inc., Garden City, N.Y.; Ask Computer Systems, Mountain View, Calif.; Sybase Inc., Emeryville, Calif.; and others.

Observers say there are now two basic groups of software vendors that look at downsizing with rather different points of view.

For example, vendors of personal computer software claim to have the best handle on downsizing. Meanwhile, the traditional mainframe software vendors say the PC software companies do not understand the difficulties of handling complex, mission-critical applications.

Revelation Technologies, New York City, recently unveiled OpenEngine, which it described as an open client/server application development system. The package is slated to begin shipping by the end of 1991.

By downsizing, MIS can build cost-effective systems with attractive user interfaces and a flexible upgrade path.

Yet, even the backers of the new technology acknowledge that it still needs to mature before MIS can comfortably downsize mission-critical applications.

"It's wise to be concerned about performance," said Schussel of DCI. "The downsizing world does not have all the utilities and features of the mainframe yet."

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