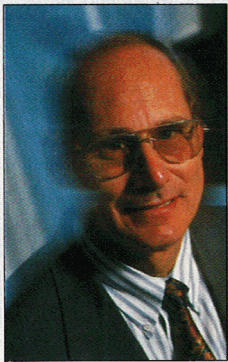# Convergent View

PARAMOUNT, AVIS SAW THE LIGHT

GEORGE SCHUSSEL

Client/server architectures allow for a combination of local development and autonomy of use with central control and implementation of standards.

Computing originally was distributed, local, and departmental in nature. The IBM 1401s of the early 1960s were located close to where computing was performed. My first computer experience was on a Bendix G-15 scientific computer located in a cubicle, just like today's PCs (but with only 2,000 characters of memory). Economies of scale and control issues drove the creation of centralized computing in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Nonetheless, it became clear that many business problems could be better solved at the local level. With the advent of client/server, a good proportion of applications development moved to local departments under the control of programmer/analysts and out from the control of an unknowledgable (at best) or indifferent (at worst) central IT department.

That's because applications can now be built with object-based tools with SQL connections to relational databases. Windows development tools like PowerBuilder can be learned in weeks, and finished applications can be deployed in periods as short as six weeks to three months. While these applications may not scale up to enterprise capability without reengineering, the applications typically solve departmental problems quite well.

An interesting example of this is the data-processing function at Paramount Pictures. Paramount's computing environment is LANs and PCs running Windows, Macs, NetWare, Sybase SQL Server, Xbase, and Gupta SQL-Windows. The typical fielded application is departmental, in Xbase, and was deployed after a three-month development period.

During last year's takeover battle for Paramount by QVC and Viacom, Paramount executives needed almost continuous information on stock prices and other business aspects related to offers from the competing camps. The cheap and easy PC-based systems did the job on an interim basis and they now serve as the templates for enterprise systems with enhanced capabilities. Michael Brown, director of PC services, says the departmental systems provided crucial support, but they suffered performance degradation as heavy usage taxed their performance envelope. Many of Paramount's systems are now being rebuilt with a multimillion-dollar budget to incorporate fault tolerance, connectivity into the mainframe, analysis of network traffic, and performance tuning.

Another benefit of client/server computing surfaces when it's time for a hardware upgrade. Before client/server, upgrading computer facilities was mostly done by moving in discrete, expensive steps to larger mainframes, while trading in the current CPU. Later, Tandem and Digital Equipment built good businesses by selling architectures that could be more easily upgraded. Client/server has brought down in price the modular upgrade capacity of the Tandem or DEC style, so it can be implemented in PC terms.

At DCI, we are implementing a web server for the Internet. We have installed NT on our old database server and have recycled it as an add-on to our existing LAN environment. As new functions and databases come on line, we add clients or servers modularly.

Still, the key advantages from client/server environments are in end-user productivity. The success story of Avis, reported in the Oct. 17 issue of *U.S. News & World Report*, is a case in point, where its Tulsa reservation center's client/server system has helped cut training time. "The company typically hires 250 new people a year for the reservation center, and in the past it took them four weeks to learn their jobs. Now they're up to speed in half the time." Another advantage that client/server brought was the average conversation time with customers—down by five seconds. That adds up: Each second of talk, says the report, costs Avis $100,000 a year.

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