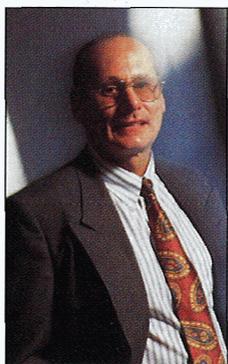


Convergent View



GEORGE SCHUSSEL

OF DATABASES AND DIVERSITY

The client/server architecture offers a far greater choice of brands at each technology point than any proprietary or time-sharing approach. Here, diversity absolutely flourishes, with end users loyal to a host of different GUI "standards," from Presentation Manager to Motif.

It is just such diversity that gives a client/server architecture enormous flexibility. Before their adoption of client/server computing, companies struggled with a software make-or-buy dilemma brought about by rigid corporate IT standards.

Nonetheless, indulging in a willy-nilly selection of products from every vendor is a sure prescription for failure. Diversity can be wonderful at selection time, but, on implementation, the best solution has the minimum amount of diversity necessary to solve the problem. Diversity and that gray area—or perhaps black hole of openness—is especially pertinent to what is happening in the database arena.

Consider what's going on at IBM, where the Software Solutions Division is tailoring the DB2 database for each of IBM's major operating systems. Then look at Microsoft. It bought Sybase's fundamental database technology and is ripping out all of the code that allows Sybase run on any platform. Instead, Microsoft is forging the tightest possible bonds between the database engine and Windows NT to make SQLServer the most efficient WNT database that it can.

For any of Digital's long-term customers, those strategies should sound familiar. They are what the late David Stone advocated for VMS and Rdb in the late '80s. Only something went wrong in that scheme and, after months of rumors, Oracle and Digital jointly issued press releases in September announcing the sale of Rdb, along with CDD, DEC DBMS, and Rally, to Oracle. Oracle's announcement indicated that it would continue to support, enhance, and port especially Rdb; hire 250 Digital employees involved in the development of the Rdb software; open a New England devel-

opment center for Rdb housing the former Digital developers; and develop a path that would eventually result in a merger of Oracle and Rdb DBMS products.

The deal is a good one for Oracle. As for the beleaguered Digital, it's probably a good short-term strategy. Unfortunately, it is likely also to be seen as a signal as to how things are going at Digital, which has now sold its principal corporate DBMS product.

In particular, Oracle picked up about \$35 million in added expenses with this acquisition, for a revenue stream that last year generated \$108 million. With the purchase price at \$108 million, and analyzed as a pure continuing business, Oracle should see a payoff in three years. When one adds the potential for Oracle license sales into large DEC shops along with some of the excellent technology that was acquired, Oracle should do just fine.

For Rdb customers, the news is mixed. Will the Rdb and Oracle products merge one day? Don't count on it. There has never been another merger of two different mature DBMS products. Computer Associates, the expert in these matters, continues to maintain independent development initiatives for IDMS and Datacom.

It is too difficult to really merge different DBMS engines, although the technology from each product can find its way into the other. Fundamentally, the sale of Rdb to Oracle means that eventually the evolution of the Rdb product line will some day peter out.

Oracle will want customers to migrate to its own product. Oracle's parallel server will be offered as the technology that can supplant Rdb at large-volume, high-transaction-rate customers. While they will eventually lose some diversity in RDBMS product offerings, given Oracle's size and overall reputation, Digital's customers should be pleased at where their product landed.

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