

Nearly 400 users crowded a ballroom in San Francisco's Nikko Hotel last week to hear consultants and fellow users sing the praises of what promises to be one of the hottest IS trends of the 1990s: downsizing, the movement of mainframe-class applica-

USERS SUGGEST UPBEAT FUTURE FOR DOWNSIZING



Downsizing helps improve response-time consistency for cable car schedule inquiry

tions to PCs and networks.

Organizer George Schussel of Digital Consulting Inc. in Andover, Mass., said user reaction to last week's conference was among the most enthusiastic he has seen in a 20-year career of organizing such events, "because [downsizing] is real and offers real benefits."

Testimonials to the value of downsizing were the order of the day. Richard G. Taylor, manager of information resource planning at Rogers Group Inc., a \$100 million mining and construction firm based in Nashville, is gradually moving applications from an IBM 4381 host to AT&T Unix workstations. In his presentation last week, Taylor estimated the move would mean a reduction of \$500,000 in his \$3.5 million annual IS budget over the next few years.

Replacing a sales information system written in 1965 with a system established on Emeryville, Cal-

if.-based Sybase Inc.'s SQL server and PCs running IBM's OS/2 has meant improved response time and better reporting, said William B. Soper, project manager of the Chevron Automated Sales Team Product at Chevron Canada Ltd., a billion dollar Vancouver, B.C.-based subsidiary of the U.S. oil company. Soper told attendees that although one complex query takes three seconds on the prototype PC system, "that's quite an improvement from the two weeks it takes to extract the same information from the mainframe."

Downsizing can improve response-time consistency, even if it doesn't improve response time itself, said conference attendee Rod Loucks, manager of application development at San Francisco's Public Utilities Commission. The mainframe-based system used by operators to answer questions about bus

and cable car schedules varied in response time from three seconds to 25 seconds. The new, local area network-based system responds in three seconds—all the time.

In addition, the LAN system offers the opportunity to create a new graphic front end that would allow operators to click on the starting point and destination and let the computer determine which bus lines to recommend.

Of course, PCs can't do everything mainframes can, cautioned consultant Richard Finkelstein, president of consulting firm Performance Computing Inc. in Chicago. One application

that required sorting a million items every half hour or so took five hours to execute on PCs. Plus, high-volume transaction processing applications can overwork PC disk drives to the extent that they literally smoke, he said.

Still, Finkelstein noted that the pressure to move as many applications as possible to the smaller platform will remain, as long as the MIPS (millions of instructions per second) costs \$100,000 on a mainframe and \$500 on a PC.

The debate over downsizing is over, says vendor E. Linwood Pearce of Sage Software in Rockville, Md. "Customers no longer ask whether to downsize, only how and how fast." They got some of those answers at last week's conference and may seek more at Digital Computing's next one, which will be held in Boston next April.

—Paul E. Schindler Jr.