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New way of doing business set to emerge - new 'browser-server' architecture - Internet/Web/Online Service Information

Grant Buckler

A new architecture that might be called browser-server computing is emerging. It will not entirely replace the client-server model we know today, but it will probably at least influence the way most client-server systems work.

There are plenty of unanswered questions about this new model, but companies should start to explore it, according to George Schussel, founder and chief executive of Digital Consulting Inc. in Andover, Mass.

Speaking at his company's Internet World conference in Toronto last fall, Schussel said using Internet protocols to link clients to servers makes good sense in several ways. It cuts costs. It makes it easier to support a mix of client platforms, because the application need only be concerned with the Web browser.

Client-server computing has its roots in the file server model, where nearly all work was done on the client and the server was just a place to store data. This led to the two-tier client-server model, which turned the file server into a proper database server. Then in the past two years came three-tier client-server, using an application server separate from the database server and relying on the client only for presentation logic.

What some now call browser-server computing is a variation on this three-tier model. The client runs an Internet browser and a Web server links the client to the central data and applications -- though the physical link is probably over a private corporate network rather than the Internet.

A second generation of Web applications are adding database capabilities, creating a resemblance to client-server environments. And Java presents some interesting possibilities for distributing applications in this model.

In the next year or so, Schussel forecasts, many software vendors will start to launch what will in effect be fourth-generation languages for developing Web applications.

"This is application development for open clients," he says. "The client is a browser, period."

One advantage is obvious. If you have a mixture of clients -- Windows 95, some Windows 3.1, Apple Macintosh, maybe even Unix, OS/2, DOS or NT -- you can treat the browser as the universal client.

Also, says Russ Frame, a manager with Deloitte & Touche Consulting Group in Toronto, the traditional client-server approach puts too much application logic on the client, making applications hard to maintain and update.

"The problem with that was if you changed the business logic, you needed to change the program," he says, and to do that you needed access to each client.

Of course, the browser-server model would also fit well withthin clients, NetPCs, or whatever is your favorite flavor of a cheap, simple desktop device.

Schussel says the browser-server approach is a very good way to provide access to large numbers of clients. But he doesn't think client-server computing will go away.

First, he says, the Internet -- or an intranet -- is essentially a client-server network anyway. Second, the traditional client-server approach will remain the best way to do some things, while browser-server will be better for others.

Frame says for small workgroups with homogenous client hardware and software, the browser-server model may have few advantages. However, it will make very good sense where there is diverse client hardware and a large or dispersed group of users -- and that describes a growing number of organizations.