

The mainframe - still going strong at the heart of the enterprise

It's that time of year at Arcati when we analyse the results of our annual mainframe data center survey (www.arcati.com/yearbook) to find out whether Big Iron is still BIG in the corporate enterprise. Are the superior availability and manageability of the mainframe winning the hearts and minds of the IT decision-makers, or is the mighty machine beginning to look like yesterday's news?

Well, as you might imagine, it's a very mixed picture. I think it's fair to say that there is no such thing as a typical mainframe shop. There are companies that are investing heavily in their large centralized systems, happy that the mainframe architecture offers both a mature legacy environment and strong prospects for the future. There are those that are facing internecine struggles, with some managers favoring IT centralization and others trying to steer a distributed Windows or Linux-based course. There are businesses that would gladly develop new applications for the zSeries platform but have concerns over future support with a 'graying' workforce; and there are those that believe they might be able to save money by 'downsizing' but can see no practical way of migrating their core systems.

With such a complex array of requirements and solutions, identifying trends can be difficult. One thing that is clear from our research is that the mainframe has a long-term future within the enterprise, with a substantial majority of respondents expecting their mainframe apps to remain firmly in place. 75% reported MIPS growth of up to 25% a year, and nearly half said that their legacy applications would continue to be actively enhanced and integrated with new apps over the next few years. Over 60% said that their mainframe systems participate wholly or partly with web services, and 40% said that four fifths or more of their enterprise data resides on the mainframe.

For most established users of large systems, then, there is very little doubt of the long-term value of their technology. Our survey suggests, though, that there is a growing distinction between the organizations where the platform is considered as 'strategic' by senior management and those where the mainframe is basically viewed as an overhead. Complex pricing schemes coupled with concerns over long-term availability and support for key applications make the mainframe environment a less than appealing prospect for some CIOs, particularly those who have risen to the role via the 'distributed' route with little understanding of the characteristics that have made mature large systems so critical to the success of the enterprise.

Reversing this polarization of the mainframe community is no easy task and, while it might well be true that the most committed users are also the largest spenders, the sense of uncertainty that permeates the large systems sector does little to encourage new users or to reassure existing ones. There can be little doubt that the IBM mainframe is now technically far stronger and arguably more cost-effective than it has been for some years, but the issue involves not just the price per MIPS but the ease with which the platform can be integrated into the rest of the IT infrastructure.

One of the questions we asked our respondents was what they considered to be the main obstacles to mainframe acceptance within the enterprise. The most widely cited problem, inevitably, was that the mainframe was too expensive - or appeared to be (the

subject of many articles and debates in the past and many more to come). The second most popular reason for the mainframe's struggling acceptance in many organizations was actually nothing to do with technology - it was the cultural barrier that exists between mainframers and other IT professionals. Like it or not, mainframers are different (not just older!) and have a different perspective on technical and business priorities from their counterparts in other parts of the IT empire. Look around the average data center and these differences are not hard to spot. Those on the mainframe side of the fence might justifiably argue that they have a grasp of performance and manageability disciplines that are barely understood on other platforms, and those on the distributed side could claim that they are closer to the bleeding edge of the business. But unless more is done to break down the wall and share expertise and experience between the two camps, large companies could become increasingly wary about continuing to support mainframe systems in-house - particularly at a time when so much expertise is about to disappear because of retirement.

Bottom line: the mainframe is in great shape and looks set to remain at the heart of the enterprise for the foreseeable future. But how large a part it plays in supporting the next generation of corporate applications clearly depends on the extent to which mainframers and the distributed server community can play ball together.