

## **Slaying the monster in the machine room**

Looking through the results of Arcati's recent annual survey of mainframe-centric IT users, one fact stands out a mile. Data centres are remarkably complex entities, and the problem is not improving. Each enterprise IT installation is made up of a unique combination of technologies, numerous points of failure, and 101 reasons to make things simpler if only a way could be found to do it.

The typical enterprise IT installation supports a diverse range of distributed platforms - various shades of Unix, mainframes of different vintages and architectures, mid-range machines like IBM's iSeries, and Windows servers running applications that bring a whole new meaning to the word 'legacy'. And it doesn't get any easier when you drill down to the individual platforms. In our survey of just 100 users, we asked respondents to list the primary operating system version used on their IBM mainframe - and we received 13 different answers!

Let's face it, we have created a monster in the machine room. Our data centres are crying out for better integration, simplification, standardization, and all they get is further complexity. Small wonder that Open Source software has been greeted with such enthusiasm by the IT industry - though with understandable scepticism among the data centre community. Open Source promises so much, but there have been so many previous attempts to provide a single software platform - either at the database, OS, or application level. In each case, the same problems occurred - either the level of lock-in was unacceptable (technically or financially) or the single standard was impractical in terms of performance, functionality or migration effort.

Will Open Source prove to be any different? Let's be clear - there are vast numbers of Linux applications out there on the perimeter of the business, performing print/file and web functions; the question is, is it ready to move into the business-critical transaction and CRM environment? Even if it is ready, will the platform-independence of Open Source help us to reduce the level of operational management complexity in the Data Centre, or will it simply add to the growing support headache that large businesses face today?

## **Open Source in the Data Center**

Well, there are signs that 2005 might be the year when Linux and associated Open Source tools make their presence felt in the data centre. At this year's LinuxWorld conference, for example, heavyweights such as IBM and Novell spoke at length about the unique capabilities of Open Source, and stressed the fact that Linux could now scale effortlessly across the entire hardware range. They demonstrated tools that help software vendors to implement their Linux applications on one server and then 'hop' them rapidly to other platforms, from entry-level servers and clusters up to the mainframe. Suddenly the reality of standard, cross-platform applications is swinging into view.

This is great news for the software companies, of course, and potentially it's good news for users if it encourages vendors to port Open Source applications rapidly to platforms that might otherwise have been neglected. But it still doesn't do much to reduce the

complexity of managing and supporting existing applications within an operational environment that is, in many cases, unique to the company that is running it. As an industry, we still need to focus on simplifying and standardizing the elements of the data centre environment, in order to make the glass-house more responsive to the unpredictable demands of the modern enterprise.

### **Cost and service are the bottom line**

The other thing that our recent survey reminded us is that, in a world of rapidly changing whizz-bang technology, the key priorities of the enterprise IT department change remarkably little. In our list of priorities and challenges, we found that 'Cost' was way out in front (preoccupying 72% of IT managers), followed by 'Responding more quickly to business change'. No matter what new solutions the software industry decides to throw our way, those priorities never seem to change.

We already knew that, I think. But it's so easy to forget that business leaders don't want their data centres to be staffed by rocket scientists like Quatermass, slaving night and day to produce a new and individually crafted monster. All internal IT functions are different because they reflect the organizations they serve, which in turn depend on their own individuality to achieve commercial differentiation. But it's by focusing on the areas of commonality, and finding ways to standardize on management procedures and tools, that real cost and service benefits will be achieved.