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Rediscovering and Reinventing an Old Friend:
IBM Announces Transformation of the eServer iSeries
By Clay Ryder

IBM today announced a significant transformation of its eServer iSeries that seeks to provide mainframe-class technology within a simple pre-packaged solution. The new IBM eServer iSeries allows customers to add additional CPU capacity on a temporary or permanent basis, create up to ten Linux server partitions on a single processor, run multiple operating systems including Linux and OS/400, and allow small and medium businesses the ability to consolidate and manage Windows applications and data. This announcement is part of a two-year, $500 million initiative to re-energize and expand the capabilities of the eServer iSeries platform.

Key features of today's announcement include:

- Five models with varying levels of system performance: New iSeries 800 and i810 servers for entry level performance and new i825 and i870 servers joining the i890 for the high performance environments.

- IBM Middleware: The new servers are the first from IBM to include a complete middleware stack as part of a standard product. IBM eServer iSeries Enterprise Edition systems include IBM Lotus QuickPlace and Sametime, WebSphere-Express, Tivoli, and DB2 database software. WebSphere Application Server-Express features autonomic, self-configuring "install wizards," and is available only on iSeries. Enterprise Edition customers also have the option of the full WebSphere Application Server.

- Linux: The first mid-market system to offer advanced Linux virtualization capabilities, capable of running up to ten Linux partitions on a single processor.

- Windows: Consolidation capabilities allow customers to centrally manage Windows applications using an integrated IBM eServer xSeries card running on an iSeries frame. In addition, external xSeries servers can be high-speed linked with the iSeries, whereby OS/400 will see these resources virtually as being one server and not external servers.

- Capacity Upgrade on Demand (CUoD): Temporary or permanent on/off CPU capacity upgrade on demand without the need to take the server or application down.

- POWER4 CPU: All midrange and high-end iSeries models (i825, i870, i890) now feature the latest in the POWER family of microprocessors with solutions of up to 32-way at the highest end.

- Multiple OS support: iSeries can operate applications developed for the OS/400, Windows, Linux, and UNIX environments.

Pricing/Availability

Hardware and software are now priced separately for the eServer iSeries and the new hardware pricing offers price/performance improvements of up to 80% as well as a new entry-level iSeries 800 with a $9,995 price point. In addition, interactive performance charges are eliminated for traditional applications modernized for

the Web with the IBM WebFacing Tool of WebSphere Development Studio Client.

iSeries Standard Edition, starting at $12,000, supports e-business applications and includes the capability to run multiple operating systems, CUoD, and dynamic logical partitioning.

iSeries Enterprise Edition, starting at $78,000, supports ebusiness and traditional applications and, in addition to the Standard Edition features, provides a range of IBM DB2, WebSphere, Lotus, and Tivoli middleware, as well as education and services. This edition also offers free processor activation for Linux on the iSeries 870 and iSeries 890, and an integrated IBM eServer xSeries for Windows integration.

The new IBM eServer iSeries models will be available on February 21, 2003.

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Perhaps one of the more pivotal moments in business computing history was the introduction of IBM AS/400 in the late 1980s. Although by today's standards the AS/400 may seem a bit anachronistic, the fact is untold thousands of these machines continue to quietly hum away at the tasks for which they were deployed. What is more amazing is that many of these machines have remained undisturbed since the day they started operating. In today's environment where one of the pitched battles between the UNIX and Windows Server camps remains minimizing the need to reboot a system after a configuration change, it is all too easy to forget that deeply integrated solutions with relatively simple management and configuration tools have been around for some time: the former AS/400, now eServer iSeries.

Given the market's continued coalescence around the commodity industry standard IA32 architecture, and the remaining few chips duking it out for the UNIX (and perhaps Linux) faithful, why would IBM and the marketplace as a whole benefit from the rediscovery and renewed faith in the seemingly proprietary ASA/400 architecture and operating system? The simple answer is that while iSeries has delivered on the promise of integration, virtualization, and management simplicity, other solutions have merely paid varying degrees of lip (or consulting) service to this end. Today's announcement takes the iSeries' integration, ease of use, etc. to a higher level, bringing this extensibility and management finesse not only to improve higher-price performance OS/400 solutions, but to provide an integration platform for Windows- and Linux-based solutions as well. This is a fundamental change in IBM's view of the future of the iSeries that is also a driving vision of IBM's eBusiness on Demand program.

The separation of hardware and software pricing combined with the availability of temporary CUoD bestow a new cost containment and future growth insurance on customers. This will allow enterprises to more responsively deploy their computing infrastructure for existing OS/400 applications while simultaneously deploying state-of-the-art Web-based applications and services natively executing in Linux or Windows within the iSeries managed environment. Thus, the notion of iSeries as a specialty server best suited for traditional stand-alone corporate application support is replaced by the view that iSeries is the middleware integration platform for the SMB marketplace. iSeries is now positioned to meet the challenge of transitioning existing applications into Web-based applications or Web Services. Using the eServer xSeries card, these applications can now integrate into the iSeries environment with its inherent flexibility in storage management, capacity management, partitioning, and dynamic CUoD. For enterprises that are increasingly faced with multiple Intel-based solutions that cannot be easily shared and reconfigured in a dynamic fashion, the partitioning and provisioning of a Linux or Windows environment, for example, all without a system reboot, represents a substantial improvement in TCO and ROI. In addition, if these partitions act as network servers for their respective operating environments, they can then become focal points for managing multitudes of horizontally distributed servers within the enterprise.

Although many technological and LOB advantages are evident in the latest eServer iSeries solution, some serious market cultivation challenges exist. While extending the existing iSeries base sounds like a logical path, it is no secret that these loyal users also have a mix of other equipment, including UNIX and commodity Intel solutions. Ironically, these users for the most part would extol the virtues of the iSeries as their specific

LOB solution that never goes down, yet few know it is possible, or even would consider the option, to support their Web-facing applications on this platform. In a Web-based world renowned for blue screens and reboots (or tattoos and body piercing), the venerable iSeries' possibilities have been largely overlooked. In many respects, the relative ease of deployment and use of the iSeries has rendered it essentially invisible (from a maintenance and hassle perspective) in the IT environment, so it suffers from loss of mindshare when new solutions are contemplated.

Given this reality in the loyal iSeries user base, how will the uninitiated masses be convinced of its unique value proposition? Answer: it will take a lot of work. This is the most troubling challenge facing IBM with this product rollout. In a commodity-driven marketplace whose focus is overly fixated on initial acquisition costs, the immediate and long-term value of iSeries solutions can be easily and simplistically disregarded. If the is iSeries is to be rediscovered as anything more than a niche solution, new mainstream customers must be brought into the fold. But as daunting as this challenge may seem, it would behoove IBM to take a lesson from its past and apply it to the future.

 The AS/400 excelled due to its relative simplicity, integration, and perceived single-mindedness as a solution to the needs of corporate LOB. Given the current disarray of many IT solutions and their associated operational costs, positioning iSeries as the configuration management and integration solution for a Web-focused network in a serious LOB environment would differentiate its technological capabilities while providing an economic imperative that is sure to resonate with budget-constrained enterprises. In a nutshell, leverage the AS/400's history of solving LOB needs without mandating extensive IT intellect. Although seemingly simplistic on the surface, in today's environment a discussion on achieving management simplicity and efficiency via new iSeries solutions is well positioned to be received with open arms by CIOs and other IT professionals.