

## Are you being served?

By Eamon McGrane

**16.01.2008** - Advances in server technology are bringing virtualisation to the top of the IT agenda but how should this fit into a CIO's strategy?

The IT crowd is like a group of hangers-on always looking for the next big thing. That piece of technology they can hitch their wagons to which will propel them into further financial nirvana while providing their clients with a new and better service.

So despite the ringing cries of 'downturn' throughout most of this decade, there have still been a fair share of technical developments, from software as a service to online social networking. The development that's arguably attracting the most interest at an enterprise IT level is virtualisation technology. Driven by vendors such as VMware, it is helping many organisations turn a corner when it comes to consolidating servers therefore reining in spending, hardware footprint and dealing with other issues such as power and cooling.

Virtualisation and consolidation of servers may cut costs, although it isn't just about finance as Liam Halpin, managing director of Fujitsu Siemens Computers, makes clear. More importantly, it offers the possibility to deploy virtual servers very quickly. "If you have a virtualised environment you do reduce the number of servers and gain the ability to provide virtual servers to support business needs. So cost is one thing but flexibility is the other," he says.

Virtualisation is also helping to achieve business aims and, at its most basic, means giving the end customer the service they expect. If you go online to bank you're unconcerned about what's behind the silicon curtain — you just want to be able to pay bills and transfer money. The main focus of companies deciding to consolidate their servers is serving their customers, according to Halpin. When a company is considering an IT project such as consolidating servers into a virtual environment, they need to ask themselves if it helps the organisation reduce cost, increase flexibility and allows them to give a better service to the customer. "If someone is looking at a project and can tick at least two of those boxes then it's a runner. If they can tick all three it's a win, win, win situation," he says.

The flexibility that virtualisation offers has been available for many years in the mainframe area. Within this sphere existed a computing pool, a storage pool and a shared network. "Now it's possible on x86 architecture and to a large extent you're looking at virtualisation and server consolidation offering mainframe capability without its pricing," says Halpin.

A good example of the effect virtualisation is having on companies can be seen from Fujitsu Siemens' work with Standard Charter bank in Britain. Using the company's blade frame technology the bank managed to reduce its server count from approximately 800 servers to 96 bladeservers in a blade frame architecture. According to Halpin, in a traditional server consolidation process Standard Charter would only have reduced to 500 machines. "With virtualisation you're literally turning your IT infrastructure into a resource. You've all the processing power and memory and it's how you allocate it when you need it. And that's the clever bit around virtualisation, you don't need to have one server per application or per stream."

While large organisations with hundreds of servers are seeing the benefit of virtualisation are smaller companies seeing its value? Halpin believes the more monolithic companies with farms of servers will see a more pronounced effect of virtualisation. Having said that, he adds the caveat that it all depends on the lifecycle server stage of the company. "If last year you bought 200 servers, you've still got to sweat those assets to get a return on them unless what you've invested in isn't working for you. Virtualisation really isn't for the company with five servers. The technology kicks into its own when you're looking at 100-plus machines. For those companies it's all about reducing complexity and for the CIO or IT manager to be able to deliver to the business the resources they require when necessary."

Tim Bisley, VP EMEA for British company Nimsoft, says virtualisation is the current buzzword on the lips of most IT professionals. Today, the virtualisation concept dovetails with the ever-growing view that IT is a service that must deliver to agreed targets and against stringent expectations. "If businesses think that virtualisation is still about cutting costs, they are in for a rude awakening," says Bisley. In the current commercial environment, the one constant drum beat is service. As a result, Bisley believes IT departments will be judged by the service they deliver rather than by how many servers they can consolidate.

For hard-pressed IT professionals, the challenge that virtualisation throws up is how to manage a complex, heterogeneous server environment without compromising the standards set out in service-level agreements. "From the IT department's perspective, virtualisation offers them the ability to squeeze more out of their existing server infrastructure. One server can suddenly be turned into four servers, all running multiple applications and services. The flip side, however, is that managing this set-up becomes ever more complicated."

If a business virtualises the IT environment, then it must put in place a strategy to proactively manage the IT infrastructure, Bisley adds. "You can't have the former without the latter."

For once, Irish companies aren't on their own in lagging behind virtualisation trends throughout the world. Most organisations throughout Europe are in a similar predicament, Bisley believes. But this gap seems likely to close with one of the technology's biggest exponents VMware expanding its Irish support facility in anticipation of a boom in the uptake of the technology. "It's fair to assume that Irish organisations will be encouraged to reconsider their approach to virtualisation," Bisley suggests. "What's interesting is that Ireland has a small but growing MSP sector. If any Irish organisation is going to embrace virtualisation, I expect it to be Irish MSPs. Given the strong bond that exists between the Irish and US IT communities, I would also expect Irish businesses to be quicker on the uptake when it comes to adopting virtualisation than their European counterparts."

Bisley disagrees with Halpin on one point, arguing that companies of any size can reap benefits from server consolidation. As with any new technology, however, the devil is in the detail. "Simply virtualising your server estate will not guarantee business success. The more you virtualise the more problems you create and store up for yourself. Effective, proactive management is the key to successful virtualisation," he concludes.