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October 1, 2004  
Mary Sumner

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### A banner year for virtualization

By:

Network World (03 Feb 2006)

IT execs who have delayed virtualizing their x86-based servers for fear the technology is still unproven should put that project at the top of their to-do lists for 2006, as the market for virtualizing the low-volume systems heats up. Companies lacking a virtualization strategy for low-end systems will pay more in the long run, in hardware costs and management headaches, analysts say.

It's a combination of factors – the increasing power and stability of the x86 platform, the maturing of virtualization software and a growing choice of software vendors – that is driving adoption at a surprisingly fast clip. IT research firm IDC describes the shift to x86-based server virtualization as well underway and expects widespread adoption to take place during the next couple of years, without “a five- to 10-year gradual market shift as in other technology areas.”

Gartner, for example, estimates that most x86-based servers running a single application – the traditional deployment for these low-end boxes – operate at about a 10 per cent average utilization rate. Using virtualization to consolidate workloads into a single box should increase utilization significantly.

It makes sense for IT departments to strategize for it, if they have not implemented some form of virtualization already, said Stephen Ibaraki, director-at-large for Canadian Information Processing Society (CIPS). “It definitely saves time, reduces server sprawl through server consolidation, lowers administrative and maintenance costs,” Ibaraki said.

In addition, as the x86 platform itself becomes more powerful, end users should find a growing list of applications appropriate for a virtualized environment. In the last couple of years, systems vendors stepped up the performance of their low-end systems with dual-core processors and 64-bit support. This year will bring servers with virtualization technology built into the silicon, a huge step for the x86 platform, which today can only be virtualized with some fancy – and performance-draining – footwork from software vendors such as VMware and Microsoft.

Having virtualization capabilities hard-wired into the chip means end users will get better performance out of virtual servers, software files that contain an operating system and applications.

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Today's management tools enable end users to easily move and copy virtual servers, providing a simple approach to disaster recovery and high availability. But advanced capabilities — such as a faster and more seamless migration of virtual servers among physical systems — are likely to come in the

months ahead. Analysts recommend that customers take a close look at management strategies when they choose a virtualization partner.

“In the next year and a half to two years, the market will be flipping on its head completely. . . . It will shift from the hypervisor [low-level virtualization technology] to management,” says Tom Bittman, a Gartner vice-president and fellow. “So the focus should be on choosing management tools and automation, not on choosing a hypervisor. That will be a commodity.”

Another development that makes 2006 a key year for deploying x86 server virtualization is movement among the independent software vendors to make licensing in a virtual environment more user-friendly. Microsoft, for example, late last year announced a new virtualization-licensing model that stands to slash costs for end users.

It's small first step, but it's encouraging to see Microsoft make an early move, industry experts agree.

Those still unsure if server virtualization on x86 systems has moved beyond hype should consider that open source is getting in on the game, with XenSource announcing its first commercial product designed to make it easier for customers to deploy and manage the open source Xen VM technology in corporate networks.

Although VMware has held a nearly uncontested leadership position since 2001, when it introduced the industry's first virtualization software for x86-based servers, 2006 will bring end users more options in virtualizing low-end systems.

Software from Microsoft, SWsoft and start-ups such as Virtual Iron and XenSource offer interesting alternatives. With the underlying virtualization technology becoming available in hardware, management tools from companies such as PlateSpin, Leostream and Platform Computing deserve a closer look. Analysts also expect systems vendors such as Dell and HP to intensify their focus on this area.

“Provisioning, securing, and testing systems is so much easier with virtualization. You can also save on licensing costs too,” Ibaraki said. “But, let's not get ahead of ourselves. Full penetration will take time so look to the end of 2006 before there are significant gains made.”

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