

Users face high cost for guaranteed uptime

By Jaikumar Vijayan

A SLEW OF fast-growing applications such as enterprise resource planning and electronic commerce are forcing information systems departments to pro-

vide ever higher levels of system and application availability.

Tapping in to the opportunity are several vendors with offerings aimed at letting companies do just that. But implementing some of those technologies

could be expensive, users cautioned.

Last week Hewlett-Packard Co. announced new partnerships and technologies in its campaign to deliver 99.95% guaranteed uptime to corporations on all the servers, networks and databases

the company supports.

On the network side, for example, HP is partnering with Cisco Systems, Inc. to guarantee HP customers less than five hours of unplanned network downtime per year. Similarly, HP and EMC Corp. have teamed to deliver a technology that lets users cluster systems up to 40 kilometers apart in a high-availability configuration.

Such technologies are important because "application uptime is a very crucial issue for us," said David Krauthamer, director of information technology at Advanced Fiber Communications (AFC), a Petaluma, Calif.-based telecommunications equipment maker.

ALWAYS UP

AFC spent the past six months putting in place a high-availability environment that includes redundant HP 9000 Unix database servers, clustered application servers, RAID arrays, mirrored storage devices and a long-distance fail-over capability to guarantee that the company's systems are available 24 hours per day, six days per week.

HP isn't alone in offering such technologies.

On the Unix side, firms such as Compaq Computer Corp. (through its acquisition of Digital Equipment Corp.) and NCR Corp. have similar technologies.

On the Windows NT side, vendors such as Microsoft Corp. with its Wolfpack clustering and Compaq with its fault-tolerant technologies from Tandem Computer Systems, Inc. are also vying for a piece of the high-availability pie.

While the appeal — and need — for such technologies is very high, so is the cost of implementing them, said the information technology director of a Seattle-based manufacturing company who asked not to be identified.

COST INCREASES

The company's systems are available roughly 99.3% of the time every year. It is trying to nudge that figure up to get even better reliability, but "every point above 99% becomes exponentially more costly to achieve," he said. Moving up from 99.3% to 99.5%, for instance, will mean investing in at least 300G bytes of additional storage from the existing 300G bytes and moving from RAID storage arrays to mirrored devices.

Another problem is that "all these announcements don't amount to much until users actually implement the technologies and get to see how they work," said John Williams, MIS manager at Priority Pharmacy, Inc., a mail-order pharmacy in San Diego.

The company needs its systems continuously for 17 hours per day, five days per week. For now, it relies on technologies such as off-the-shelf storage disks with 1 million hours of mean time between failures and redundant power systems to build in the reliability it needs.

"There are many small vendors out there with very reliable equipment we can use. So we don't have to go to any of the big vendors" and pay a premium for the technology, Williams said. □

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