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Microsoft: Don't sweat the servers

5/13/2003 5:00:00 PM - An inside look at the software giant's Dynamic Systems Initiative, including a provisioning tool that could end issues around OS installation and configuration. Plus: A Canadian user's perspective



by Neil Sutton

Microsoft Corp. is working towards desktop functionality in server environments with software that will make them easier to deploy and manage.

The company recently launched a program called the Dynamic Systems Initiative (DSI)

to bring this goal into focus, but many of the specifics are still under wraps and IT managers won't see any beta releases -- let alone shipping dates -- for several years.

A portion of that program, however, should see the light of day before the end of the year. Microsoft's first DSI-based software will be a server deployment and provisioning tool called Automated Deployment Services (ADS).

"We talked to a lot of customers about deploying Windows . . . Building servers is a painful process," said Microsoft program manager Paul Sutton. "It can take many, many hours, sometimes weeks. During that time they're not only wasting valuable resources but also their operators' time."

There are two main components of ADM, according to Sutton: image-based installation and a remote script-based framework for post-installation tasks (or centralized scripting for server farms).

By using an image-install, Windows Server 2003 (the company's latest server OS), can be deployed on as many as 100 servers simultaneously. The alternative is one that over-worked IT managers have been using for years: install and configure the OS separately for each machine.

"Imaging really makes things efficient. I guess that strategy has really

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been alive and well on the desktop for a number of years," said Tony Fernandes, vice-president of technology infrastructure for **Inventure Solutions Inc.**, the IT subsidiary of VanCity credit union based in Vancouver.

VanCity, one of the earliest Canadian adopters of Windows Server 2003, is replacing Windows NT for servers throughout its organization. The upgrade has allowed the company to consolidate its file, print and mail servers from 65 down to five by centralizing the functions. They were previously handled independently in each of VanCity's offices, explained Fernandes.

There is limited remote deployment functionality already in Server 2003, said Fernandes (something called Remote Installation Service, or RIS), but true imaging on the server side would be a boon to IT departments.

"If you have a base of what the image looks like, it can all be installed at once instead of (going) through the diskettes," he said. "And there's all this configuration. That's what eats up all the time. You have to tweak everything in a certain way just to get it to run the way you want in your environment."

ADS will carefully manage server administration and deployment through a list of tasks written as an XML file, said Sutton. "The whole thing is expressed as XML and ADS goes through it one step at a time. If any one step fails, the build sets stop at that point," he said, at which time a report is generated to isolate the problem.

Microsoft's other DSI initiatives may be years away, but the company is establishing the framework early by getting hardware partners involved. Dell and HP were first on board, but have since been joined by Fujitsu Ltd., Fujitsu Siemens Computers, IBM, NEC and Newisys.

Microsoft has published a white paper of recommendations to server OEMs on how to best design equipment to take advantage of future software and OS innovations. One of those is a crypto processor or "authenticated identity" to handle cryptographic security operations.

"Maintaining security in the data centre is extremely difficult because it requires highly skilled operations and complex processes," said Galen Hunt, group program manager for the Windows server group.


The ultimate goal of DSI is to create what Microsoft's calling a Dynamic Data Center (DDC), which would remove some of this complexity by automating it. In other circles this has often been called autonomic computing, which is a reference to self-regulated human functions like breathing.

Deploying an OS to 100 servers at once should reduce some of the time and cost associated with IT management and also help cut down on human error. Hunt called the current state of IT "a crisis of complexity." He estimates that IT shops spend as much as 70 per cent of their budgets on server maintenance.

Microsoft plans to include DSI-type functionality in a broad range of its products. The next major release of Visual Studio should enable developers to build applications that can be described as an XML blueprint to make their deployment and installation easier.

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