

Dealing with Client/Server

ISSUES IN PURCHASING AND IMPLEMENTATION



This new column will offer suggestions to user organizations that buy and deploy client/server systems. First off, we consider the relative merits of Notes and the Web.

Lotus Notes in the Year of the Web

Lotus and its new owner IBM begin their life together in a fiercely competitive new industry. There is considerable overlap between the World-Wide Web and Lotus Notes in uses and functionality, such as for posting information, sharing documents, and publishing. Throughout 1996, this trend will accelerate as more companies rush to move the Web beyond being simply a place to find information into becoming an application platform. Netscape bought Collabra to bring groupware functionality to the Web. Oracle and Sybase have announced products aimed at giving Web applications text database back-end capabilities. This list will grow steadily.

How then do you recommend whether to make a new or incremental investment in Notes when the Web is coming on so strong? What business requirements will drive you to decide one way or the other? John Landy, formerly chief technology officer at Lotus and now a strategic consultant to IBM, is assigned full-time to figure this out. He has a tough job.

A Product with a Past

Originally, Notes was ahead of its time. For many IS shops, Notes was the first client/server application that involved more than one server. And, by and large, those servers ran OS/2, not Unix. Its first sales cycles were long, partly because enterprises didn't have the LAN internetworking to support the product. As users of Notes in large companies started up, the large investment in LAN infrastructure and the concept of administering replicated data made Notes seem expensive and complex.

Slowly, Lotus added TCP/IP clients and Unix servers to the Notes product line. This was a good move, because many users who were ahead of the curve on distributed computing and the Internet were not building LAN internets but

Unix-based distributed computing back ends for their Windows and Macintosh clients. This architecture scales better than the Notes original LAN platform. And because Lotus provided the platform choice users often wanted, the installed base of Notes grew.

Today, Notes has two major areas of superiority over the Web: text database and application-level security. To extend the database advantage, Lotus has established itself as a player in the Web tools marketplace with the InterNotes Web Publisher, which translates Notes databases and documents into the Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) format. As of this writing, Lotus has not figured out a way to do this with application-level security for Notes, which obviously would be useful in the Internet application environment.

What's a User to Do?

The InterNotes Web Publisher is a Notes server application that runs in conjunction with a standard Web server. By converting Notes views, it provides a navigable structure for the Web site.

The first major decision point in choosing InterNotes or other tools is whether your company already has Notes documents you'd like to put on the Web. InterNotes can translate thousands of Notes documents into a series of Web pages, complete with graphics, file attachments, table formatting, and document links.

Lotus also has InterNotes News, which permits exchange of Usenet news articles between Notes and Unix servers. Upon importing Usenet articles into Notes databases, users can make full-text searches, access threaded views of discussions, and display multiple indexed views of articles. However, this capability will not be unique for long, as database companies and Netscape develop similar functionality.

A second element in deciding whether to continue to invest in Notes is how long you can wait. Last fall, IBM announced its positioning of Notes as the "application development and staging platform for the

Internet," according to John Landry. That strategy tries to sell Notes as the way to organize your thoughts before building a Web site. However, while IBM promises to make it easier to integrate its secure Internet software with Notes, InterNotes, and IBM's gateway for linking data to the Web, this integrated product set is still vaporware.

A Note of Advice

For now, it probably is wise to focus on your business needs and keep the product announcements in perspective. Be clear on where your company's technical infrastructure is headed, because the third

decision point is whether you already have invested in a LAN infrastructure and standardized on certain desktop applications (which make the Notes style rather than hypertext links feasible for internal use). If so, Notes and InterNotes are easy to justify because they convert Notes documents into HTML and can expedite turning Notes applications into Web applications that scale to the whole wide world while Notes sits on your company's internal net.

On the other hand, if your company does not have an enterprise-wide LAN internet with TCP/IP on every desktop; if your Web site is a fresh new approach

rather than a bulletin board of existing Notes documents; and if there are many different desktop applications, go for that open Internet infrastructure and take a look at the full spectrum of Web publishing and site-building tools that compete with the Lotus offerings. Otherwise, you may regret following IBM's statement of direction while hot new tools proliferate in the marketplace.

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