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When All You Have is a Hammer, Everything Looks like a Nail: Microsoft's Midrange Alliance Program Ventures into iSeries Land

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The IBM eServer iSeries has been around for many years reliably meeting mid-market customer needs; a platform that provided business applications to companies without IT complexity. As technology has evolved, the iSeries has evolved with it, continuing to provide hallmark capabilities but also allowing software developers to take advantage of the latest application development tools and middleware. Microsoft's Midrange Alliance Program offers customers an alternative for maintaining older applications but lacks the capabilities inherent in the platform that makes the iSeries so valuable to customers.

In an age when organizations are demanding that IT be a contributor to business, everything that can be done to improve IT is important. Smaller organizations feel these constraints as much as their large counterparts and often have fewer resources. They need platforms that provide them security, scalability, and manageability; they need a platform that will serve as a good investment over the long run. This has been the traditional base of the IBM eServer iSeries, known in previous incarnations as the AS/400 and the System/38. The iSeries continues to be relevant more than thirty years after it was first introduced, and competitors have begun to give more attention to a platform that has traditionally been the understated champion of the IBM eServer family. In particular, Microsoft has recently launched its Midrange Alliance Program (MAP) in the hopes of drawing independent software vendors (ISVs) away from developing new applications for iSeries and to entice customers to shift their applications from the iSeries to Wintel platforms. The questions are: What is the intent of such a program? Is it a good idea? And who really stands to benefit from it?

Understanding the iSeries Customer Base

The traditional iSeries customer has often been a mid-market company or a department within a larger company that was a remote location or running a local application. These customers generally lack extensive or advanced IT support. They want a platform that they don't have to think about, that would just run their application reliably. They weren't much interested in the user interface, in the programming language or in other technology issues. They bought a business application and computer that worked with minimal care and feeding. Sometimes these customers were running multiple workloads on the same system. The iSeries developed a reputation over time for being able to handle additional workloads without disruptions in performance or requiring more IT attention. iSeries customers chose the platform because it was reliable, secure, and manageable. In fact IBM research indicates that many iSeries customers view their systems as mainframes, espousing many of the same values as the larger zSeries.

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Understanding Microsoft's Midrange Alliance Program

The Microsoft Midrange Alliance Program is an organization that provides a roadmap off of the iSeries onto the Microsoft platform. It is targeted not at customers, but at ISVs, service providers, and hardware manufacturers. At its core, the program is designed to allow ISVs and customers with RPG- and COBOL-based applications to migrate them to a Microsoft platform. The initiative is a .NET program positioned against IBM's approach to J2EE and spun into an overarching campaign against the iSeries. Microsoft claims they are not actively recruiting ISVs for the program but are instead offering an alternative to modernizing applications by allowing them another platform to run on which Microsoft claims has a clear roadmap and significant hardware cost savings.

The MAP is clearly targeting a small group within the iSeries universe who have written applications for RPG and Cobol, have no desire/need to update the program, or are lacking the skills to do so. These are usually customers who have older systems for an application, or for environments in which the iSeries is a minority platform in the greater data center. The MAP may also benefit customers with applications that are not mission-critical and therefore do not need the advanced capabilities of the iSeries and are essentially content with the Microsoft platform. What the MAP does not offer customers is an alternative to the iSeries with equivalent capabilities.

The Future of a State-of-the-Art Platform

Despite what Microsoft implies about iSeries developers and an iSeries roadmap, the iSeries remains a good choice with a solid future and roadmap ahead, and IBM continues to invest in the platform, increasing reliability, manageability, and security features and giving ISVs increased reasons to develop and run their applications on iSeries. The iSeries now runs on the POWER5 architecture that provides high-end capabilities for virtualization, workload management, and integration of multiple OSs and applications. As customers develop more complex IT needs, the iSeries masks that complexity behind state-of-the-art manageability and security.

For partners, IBM has continued to invest. Since 82% of iSeries sales are channel-driven, partners are an integral part of IBM's iSeries universe. At the channel level, IBM currently has more than 2,500 ISVs, and more than 6,400 applications run on the iSeries. Six hundred of these partners have now registered within a vertical industry through the PartnerWorld Industry Network, which helps ISVs target their solutions to appropriate vertical segments and within vertical solutions.

At the developer level, IBM is also investing. They have a framework that helps ISVs update their software applications, including technology training, development processes, and tools. IBM has also increased its resources for helping ISVs develop for the latest version of the iSeries operating system, i5/OS V5R3. They are also focused on Linux, with over 300 iSeries applications available from over 200 ISVs. Over 100,000 Windows and Intel developers are creating Linux-based applications that run on IBM software such as WebSphere, DB2, Lotus, and Tivoli. Finally, IBM offers Express offerings of many of their software packages to make it affordable for developers to start using IBM products.

At the End of the Day...

For most iSeries customers, iSeries remains a valid proposition; in fact, Microsoft customers should be considering a consolidation of their Windows servers onto the iSeries environment. For mission-critical applications, the iSeries provides superior availability, workload management, and virtualization capabilities. Developers looking to reduce complexity and provide secure applications for their customers would do well to stay with the iSeries and IBM.

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