

Anglia Business Solutions

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HAS SERVER HARDWARE BECOME JUST A COMMODITY?

In the distant past, ordering the right PC required more than a rudimentary knowledge of the technology. You needed to know how much memory you could get by on, how much disc space, the screen specification and how many ports you required. These were expensive items and you didn't want to pay for more than you needed. Nowadays, you can have powerful PCs with all the bells and whistles for peanuts.

So has the same thing happened to server hardware? At one stage, a decent server to run your business would cost about £30,000. It was expensive to build while the software licensing made your eyes water. In addition, as memory and disks were very expensive, you quickly ran out of space. The upgrade process was costly and inconvenient, but necessary.

Nowadays, a more powerful server than the one that would have cost £30,000 can be had for less than £1,000. The low price tag has meant that when it runs out of steam it can quickly be replaced by a much more powerful model within the same price range. With hardware prices continually dropping, price wars rage within the few remaining server suppliers. However, in an effort to compete, corners are sometimes being cut on quality to keep the price competitive.

A recent event in a non-fresh produce company illustrated the point. It had a policy of purchasing PCs and servers from one major manufacturer throughout the business. Rapid company expansion which trebled the size of the business resulted in a massive database build-up. When it came to upgrading the system, the upgrade process had to happen within a tight deadline. All of the tests on a small server from another manufacturer worked happily within the timescale in the test environment. The assumption therefore was that the much more powerful corporate servers of the original major manufacturer would be faster.

Sadly, this was not the case. Despite having much more memory and disc space, the upgrade process took longer on the bigger beast. This meant that the software was re-engineered to get it to perform within the allocated time slot. The infrastructure engineers concluded that the performance issue was related primarily to the disk controller and performance of the disk array.

The reality is that few people purchasing the server hardware would have the knowledge to explore this. The assumption is all products perform to the same level. However, companies have areas of specialisation where they excel. Purchasing user devices can be treated as commodities. However, on servers, it may pay to take a more strategic view. Once operational, they quickly become mission critical to the business and will need to cope with future growth for at least three years. ■

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