

STEERING A PATH THROUGH THE SOFTWARE-HARDWARE COURSE

This month, Tony Rose, integration director at Anglia Business Solutions, discusses the current choices available for hardware, software, processors and operating systems

JUST WHEN life should have been getting simpler, the whole hardware and software arena seems to be awash with versions, updates and, in some areas, new kids on the block.

So just what are the current versions and options for standard processors and operating systems?

Starting with the laptop; there are a limited number of processor options. The initial choice is between the primary vendors, Intel and AMD. Broadly, both of these manufacturers offer competing products in this area, and thus your choice may be guided more by your preferred manufacturer and model availability rather than performance.

Most Intel offerings are Core Duo, with processor speeds ranging from 2.0Ghz to 2.8Ghz (generally the higher the clock speed, the faster the processor). AMD is offering similar processor speeds.

Laptop choice after this is likely to be guided by disk space or monitor

Microsoft is the preferred vendor, there are still two possibilities. Despite repeated efforts, Microsoft has been unable to withdraw XP Pro in favour of Vista. It is now likely that the Vista successor (currently named Windows 7) will be released in 2010 and XP Pro may be extended until that time. An initial look at the product reveals a Vista look and feel but with higher performance.

In the server market, the choices become even more complex. The choice of manufacturer's chips is more prevalent than in the PC market, with AMD providing significant competition to Intel. Another choice that enters into the equation is the power consumption of the chip, and thus speed of processing is often linked to power consumption. Many of the chips in use are multi-core and have various levels of on-board cache, which enhances the overall server performance. Although most of the

Should you embark on this with all the additional power available from the enhanced processors outlined above?

The answer to this lies in looking at the demands of the business and setting out a policy that determines which, if any, areas of the business can benefit from virtualisation. Benefits can range from reduced space required for servers, improved administration, better disaster recovery options and lower power consumption. Sometimes uses may extend to the ability to host ageing operating systems such as Windows NT, which cannot be supported on current hardware, but are required for legacy applications.

It should not, however, be assumed that virtualisation is the panacea for all applications. The old maxim applies that with IT, you never get "something for nothing". Virtualisation will have significant benefits in areas such as file and print server and will possibly increase the ease of disaster recovery in the case of exchange server. However, with heavy database applications that make very particular demands on the hardware, it is unlikely to be entirely suitable.

There are also a set of decisions to be made when selecting a virtualisation solution. Originally there was one market leader and the choice was easy. However, in the last three months, two other significant contenders are making inroads into this marketplace. VM Ware has, for some time, been market leader, but Citrix XEN Server and Microsoft HyperV are both now serious contenders in the SME space.

In short, choices of hardware and software combinations have become more complex over the last 18 months. This is partially because both are in a state of transition between 32-bit and 64-bit products, but also because new vendors have entered the marketplace with competing products.

Choices should be based on fully understanding the needs of the business requirements and that of your chosen applications. In most instances, organisations will benefit from discussing these requirements with suitably qualified organisations that have a proven track record of dealing with such issues. ○

CERTIFIED TO DISTINCTION

ANGLIA BUSINESS Solutions has announced that its food supply chain business management system LINKFresh is now certified for Microsoft Dynamics, the highest standard for partner-developed software with the Microsoft Corporation.

Solutions 'Certified for Microsoft Dynamics' have demonstrated development quality and compatibility with the Microsoft Dynamics product on which they run. The LINKFresh solution has passed rigorous VeriTest software solution testing for Microsoft Dynamics.

Anglia was also required to provide more than 10 reference customers who are successfully using the LINKFresh solution and are willing to recommend it. All partners with 'Certified for Dynamics' solutions must also be a Gold Certified Partner in the Microsoft Partner Program; Microsoft's highest partner accreditation.

Doug Kennedy, vice-president of Microsoft Dynamics Partners, said: "By requiring both the software solution and the partner to meet our highest standards, Microsoft is assuring customers that these certified solutions work with their investments in Microsoft Dynamics.

"Microsoft congratulates Anglia Business Solutions on achieving the Certified for Microsoft Dynamics status for LINKFresh by demonstrating its success and commitment in delivering a leading Microsoft Dynamics solution."

In January 2005, Anglia set up its specialist independent software vendor (ISV) operation. This investment was designed to produce leading-edge vertical applications, based on the Microsoft Dynamics NAV platform.

Anglia's ISV director, Mark Nixon, said: "Anglia has always been committed to software excellence, and achieving this designation for LINKFresh is a reflection of that commitment."

Meanwhile, Anglia has also announced that MMD (Shipping Services) Ltd in Portsmouth has extended its LINKFresh business management solution to include the LINKFresh mobility suite.

The fully integrated LINKFresh .NET mobility solution will be deployed to enable the management of quayside, warehouse and quality control operations via handheld scanning and recording devices. The project is phase two of the LINKFresh deployment, that began last year. The handheld mobile devices will operate in any MMD location where stock is stored. ○

'In short, choices of hardware and software combinations have become more complex over the last 18 months'

capabilities. Hard disks are generally in the 160GB to 250GB range, while monitors can vary in both size and resolution.

In general, laptop decisions are most likely to be made based on the frequency of travel for the user and their preference for travelling light. In broad terms, the larger the monitor, the heavier the device and the shorter the likely battery life.

Desktops follow a similar pattern to the laptop in terms of processor, although manufacturers are not constrained by power considerations. Also with desktops, the processors can extend beyond 3.0Ghz.

Graphic cards can be of much higher importance when selecting units, and this is particularly the case if the user has a high graphics requirement (CAD, photo imaging design, etc). Usage in these areas may be so high that a separate graphics card may be called for, or even a specialist "workstation" rather than PC.

Having selected the hardware, the next significant question is the operating system. Assuming

chips are 64-bit capable, thought needs to be given as to whether a selected application such as Exchange Server 2007 demands a 64-bit processor and operating system.

Again, the choice of operating system is not straightforward. The current offering from Microsoft is Windows Server 2008 and this can be purchased in Standard, Enterprise or Data Centre Editions. Both the standard and enterprise versions can be purchased with or without HyperV and all can be installed in either 32- and 64-bit formats. Options also exist under certain licence permissions to downgrade these products to align with existing Windows Server 2003 installations.

Choices between 32- and 64-bit will be dependent upon a number of features, including what software applications are to be run on the server; but thought must also be given to such extraneous items such as printer driver, and backup versions available in 64-bit version.

And what about virtualisation? This is the buzzword of the moment.