

Tips N' Techniques

NT 4 Is Ending, So Now What?

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The end of NT's days is finally upon us. For a brief moment, it looked like Microsoft might relent, as it did with Windows 98, and continue to deliver free support for NT. But alas, it was not to be. On June 30, if you're still supporting NT Workstation users, you're on your own. Microsoft cuts your lifeline for NT 4 Server support on December 31.

This is not small business. Dan Kusnetzky, IDC vice president for system software research, tells me in his best Monty Python voice that NT is saying, "I'm not dead yet!" The key word here is "yet." Specifically, IDC is finding that about a million copies of NT Workstation are still in use, and half a million users are still running NT 4 Server. I can believe that; I have one of each still running in my own office.

Now, Microsoft says some level of security support will be available to all of its customers, for a fee, based on a model of the deal it worked out with the BITS nonprofit banking consortium. Still, if I were you, I'd be getting ready to migrate your NT customers. As my columnist in arms John Moore observes, customers are beginning to shop for migration deals.

So, what kind of deals are they looking for? Kusnetzky's numbers indicate that server consolidation is part of the story, but to me, that doesn't mean blades or rack-mounted servers. Instead, IDC is seeing that businesses are replacing multiple NT servers, as many as 10, with a single, powerful server. Powerful, though, is a relative term. A single Dell Value Tower PowerEdge 400SC Server with a 2.4GHz Pentium IV will run rings around a half-dozen 100MHz Pentium servers like the NT server I still have chugging along.

So, with that in mind, if I were trying to persuade a customer, especially an SMB (small to midsize business), to migrate, I'd pitch a low-end, white-box, conventional server rather than a fancy blade setup. Yes, it would be great if you could talk them into a real hardware upgrade, but my bet is that the bulk of your consolidation and upgrade work will be to inexpensive servers, so you might as well be ready to make the most of it. At the same time, IDC is finding that, contrary to Linux resellers' hopes, NT customers are moving not to Linux and Samba, but to newer Microsoft server operating systems.

There is a window of opportunity here for Linux resellers, but it's going to close fast. IDC expects NT users to disappear quickly now that the end of NT's life is in sight. Linux and Samba are a good deal for SMBs in general and for NT users in particular. It's almost mindlessly simple to put, say, SuSE Server 8.1 with Samba 3 in place of an NT server setup. I know—I've done it. Better still, for most bread-and-butter, file-and-print users, this particular Linux replacement is completely transparent and painless. It's also, I might add, about as easy a transfer for Windows administrations to Linux as you'll ever see. What most users seem to be wanting, though, is a Windows upgrade, not an operating system upgrade. In this case, it's a sure thing that you're also going to be upgrading the hardware. Equipment that will run NT 4 or Linux adequately will die like a dog trying to run Windows 2000, and let's not even talk about Server 2003.

That said, in my experience, it's a lot easier to upgrade from NT to Server 2003 than it is to Windows 2000. Server 2003 is simply a better operating system than W2K, and a lot of what was wrong with W2K—cough, Active Directory, cough—finally works in Server 2003. Therefore, if your customers want to stick with Microsoft, I highly, highly recommend that you move them to Server 2003. But if you're going to upgrade your customers from NT, don't even open the Server 2003 CD jewel case until you've read Microsoft's excellent guide called *Migrating from Windows NT Server 4.0 to Windows Server 2003*. Finally, let me just add that no matter how much your customers love NT, it's time to wean them off it. Without Microsoft's full support, it will only be a matter of time before some cracker finds a Windows family security crack that will blow an unpatchable NT installation off the map. And I, for one, don't want to be the reseller who has to explain to a customer that his operating system has just died a horrible death—taking his business with it.

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