Not Built Here - Apple Says 'So What?'

By Khan Klatt
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The tendency of companies to reject any technologies not developed within the confines of the corporate campus has been called the "Not Built Here" syndrome. In the past, Apple (Nasdaq: AAPL) was plagued by this affliction, to its detriment. The company was responsible for such anomalies as NuBus, Apple Desktop Bus (ADB) and Apple Display Connector (ADC).

Fortunately, this trend seems to have vanished completely from One Infinite Loop. The turning point seems to have occurred in 1996 or 1997. The most notable evidence is the Apple board of directors' decision to buy the company's most important corporate asset, Mac OS X, from NeXT in 1997.

Today, OS X even includes a variety of open source tools, making it perhaps the ultimate "Not Built Here" software. And while Apple maintains traditional development APIs for the Mac OS (which Apple generically calls Carbon), the company's Cocoa APIs also support Objective C and Java development, which draw their heritage from NeXT and Sun, respectively.

Recent Evidence

According to a joint press release from Apple, Ericsson and Sun, Apple continues to understand the value of partnering with other companies.

The best kind of partnership is one in which each company benefits and brings its expertise to the table. Ericsson is widely regarded as a leader in the mobile wireless telecommunications industry. Sun's Java 2, Mobile Edition provides development and deployment software, and Apple's QuickTime assets and expertise in digital content delivery round out this sensible partnership.

Yet, to a degree, Apple and Sun are competitors. Sun's low-end workgroup server solutions (Enterprise 250/Ultra 10S) are in the same league as Apple's high-end server offerings. Both companies' flagship server operating systems, Solaris and Mac OS X Server, share a common history and lineage. How can a company justify close cooperation with a perceived competitor?

The key lies in recognizing that Apple's strength is in desktop computing, where usability, media and digital convergence are primary factors. Sun's strength is scalability, stability and robustness in the realm of server computing. Not surprisingly, one company's weak point is the other's strong point and vice versa -- the perfect situation for a cooperative arrangement.

But what kind of arrangement would make sense? For the answer, it is instructive to take a look at Apple's server strategy.

Server Strategies

To the surprise of many new Mac OS X users, Apple's first foray into a UNIX server solution was A/UX on 68k Quadra-based Workgroup Servers, as far back as 1995. While A/UX had a small but loyal following, it was just a blip on the radar in the UNIX server market. In addition, the Quadra enclosure, while adequate, was not optimal for datacenter computing. A/UX was cancelled in light of the difficulty Apple would have faced in porting both Mac OS and A/UX to the PowerPC.

Apple instead followed up with the PowerPC-based Apple Network Server in 1996. This server featured hot-swappable, redundant hard drives, fans and power supplies. Indeed, a partnership with IBM produced the best server hardware product Apple had ever shipped, providing more evidence in favor of abolishing "Not Built Here" mentalities. Curiously, this server ran IBM's AIX UNIX operating system. Alas, in light of the NeXT acquisition, this project also was cancelled.

Since that time, Apple has reverted to the "modified desktop" strategy for its hardware, distinguishing its server products largely with value-added bundled software. This tactic has worked consistently for Apple, because piggybacking its server solutions on its desktop platform minimizes server hardware development and support costs. A situation exists now with Mac OS X Server that was not evident with A/UX or AIX: OS X and OS X Server have more in common than not.

Now What?

With no danger of Apple's server clients being left out in the cold, the worst thing Apple could do would be to readopt the "Not Built Here" attitude and assume that it needs to enter the server segment just because it can.

Apple could leave the server market to Sun and IBM, categorically refusing to enter the market, considering that they are better suited to meet those particular needs over the long term. Apple's other options are to release OS X Server for PowerPC-based IBM servers or to ink a partnership with Sun to promote OS X on the desktop and Solaris in the datacenter.

IBM has shown a willingness to be OS-agnostic as long as it sells hardware, and Sun should realize that the only way to reduce Microsoft's influence on the industry is to make inroads on the desktop. The only company in a position to help in both situations is Apple.

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