Doing More With Less - The Extreme Version

Don MacVittie, 2008-14-11

Nine things you can do to weather the storm.

We've known for quite a while that you would be asked to do more with less budget next year - the credit crunch if nothing else was going to make your organization cautious about large infrastructure investments when money in the bank is a good idea.

But starting relatively recently - it gelled yesterday, but actually started several weeks ago - tech companies and IT departments started making staff cuts. That means not only will you be asked to do more with less, but you'll be asked to do more with no growth in gear and negative growth in headcount.

That's a tough order. Necessary in most cases, but still tough.

Likely you've been scraping by for a while, which makes it even harder - the incremental gains of things like server virtualization and disk-based backups are probably in place already or on their way, and that means you've got a harder road to hoe to provide the level of support your business will require - and that level is likely to be a higher level of support as companies try harder to compete for those few dollars being spent.

Luckily, there are some things you can do - some take a little money but provide bigger benefits - that might help a bit.

- First and foremost, invest in a storage virtualization product like our ARX (no, I won't name competitors, we are all competing harder for those few dollars being spent, remember ;-)). In terms of backup window, file maintenance, disk costs, and tape costs, you will reap many times the benefits of the cost of such a product. We've got a presentation coming about our partnership with Data Domain that delves into the financial and operational benefits - watch for it, you'll get why I list this option first. It certainly was an eye-opener for me cost/benefit-wise.

- Second, IBM's green advertisements are largely right. Anything you can do to reduce power consumption reduces costs year after year. That's huge when you think of your company five years or twenty five years down the line. Be green to save some, and the benefits you can reap are huge because they're more long term than not buying that server. Indeed, they're every bit as long term as not hiring that employee you need so badly.

- "No one ever got fired for buying X" may well be changing for the next few years. That phrase is always trotted out to address the relative expense in terms of licensing or maintenance of Microsoft, IBM, or Oracle. The day is here when if it costs 10x the competition, you're darned well going to have to justify that expense. "We've always done that" won't be a valid justification either. You can try for the "It'll cost 10 bazillion dollars to retrain..." line, but outsourcing is a good answer to that kind of mentality, so I'd just shut up and figure out how to use alternative products as a matter of business. If your staff isn't learning new stuff every day then you're not keeping the best people anyway, set them out figuring out how you really CAN do more with less.

- Look around your data center. Okay, now build a list of what's there. Seriously, I'm getting to the point, humor me. Now ask yourself honestly "how many functions/capabilities does this product have that I don't even know about, let alone know how to use?" The answer is that a whole lot of your gear and software does much more than you think. Our products are often significantly underutilized, and users jump on some functionality once they know what's possible. If you bought BIG-IP LTM as a load balancer way back in the day, and have never modified how you use it, look at it again. It's a whole lot more than a load balancer these days, even if you don't buy any of our add-on modules, and the same is true for other vendors. Oracle has bought and innovated so many things that I think there's a little-known function in 11g that makes coffee for the CEO and delivers it at the desired temperature to his desk. So ask your staff to start looking into the capabilities of products you already own. Even if sometimes you have to upgrade, if it saves buying and maintaining another piece of hardware, it should be a no-brainer.

- When you're busier, as I suspect you're about to be, time spent surfing suffers. You need to make certain your staff knows that it's important to the organization that they hit sites that talk about products you use every day. This will help the last point, but in general it helps them learn from what other users are doing. Great sites for this type of functionality include F5's DevCentral and Oracle's TechNet. You can share and learn about making the most of your investment with just a couple of man-hours a week, as long as you're open to listening when someone comes with a new idea. This also helps retain the best people because they're learning, and most organizations freeze

hires before they lay people off, so hanging on to the good employees is about to become very important.

- Put off that upgrade. Seriously. Upgrades are tedious and painful to begin with, but in an environment where money is tight, spending money for something you may not need is insane. Justify each upgrade and put a timeline on it. Just because "everyone" is performing the upgrade in November, do you need to spend the cash then? Think of it this way, if your upgrade is going to cost $60K, how much can your organization earn in interest if you put it off six months? Is there anything you *must* have in the upgrade? Doing this evaluation with every upgrade will quickly add up in cost savings, just make certain you're not being so assiduous at it that you're losing even more in efficiency.

- Get rid of the dead weight before hiring is frozen. Most large organizations have people who are massively under-performing. It is painful, time consuming, and legally risky to fire these individuals unless they violate a zero-tolerance policy. But imagine yourself five years from now, when things are all working great again, are you better off for having kept these people? Not bloody likely. Take the time and effort to document the problems, and move them along. If you have to lose someone, don't let the layoff genie decide when you know who it would be given absolute choice based upon performance.

- Sanity check your organization. We all have things that don't make sense, the bigger the organization the more of these things there are. If you have a 10 gig internal backbone and two 1.5 gig external lines, ask yourself if you need 7 gig internally, and if not, if there's a better solution. Likewise, if you have one application that is the only thing running on vendor X's database or OS, and that database or OS costs money every year, it's time to consider moving the application. I'm not a fan of "we only use Oracle" because vendors often tie your hands in that space - if a vendor's vertical solution only runs only on SQL Server and they're the best product for the business, then "we only use Oracle" is more roadblock than help... But there are two sides to every coin. Complete capitulation to software anarchy isn't a great idea either. See where you can consolidate to reduce costs, even if there is a minor up-front cost.

- Before upgrading your Internet connectivity, look into a Web Acceleration product. Traffic to business sites is not likely to grow at this time, so don't commit your organization to hundreds or thousands of dollars more bandwidth a year without considering something like our WAM. If you can answer the problem without agreeing to monthly fees, you're saving money in the long run, even though initial outlay for a web accelerator may (but this is not certain) be more.

Think of the next few months/years as a time you have to get through. The changes in the market are something the business will have to deal with, but the above ideas and other great ones floating about will help you contribute to your organization's success in a trying time.

Me? I'll be here, with the rest of my team, helping you figure out how your F5 gear can help, and pushing the envelope on the possible. Drop by on occasion.

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