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VIEWPOINT

Leaping to the defence of iSCSI

Paul Klinkby-Silver hits back at claims that storage technology is failing to live up to expectations

MORE HYPE THAN REALITY. THAT WAS the criticism levied against iSCSI by Woody Hutsell, executive vice-president of Texas Memory Systems, in his article 'Extra Fibre improves performance' (CRN, 14 February 2005). He described the market as overcrowded and said iSCSI was failing to make an impact. I'd like to challenge Mr Hutsell on some of the points raised.

Describing the SAN market as overcrowded is rather like saying the car market is overcrowded. With a market worth \$16bn worldwide and an increasing shift to networked storage, there is enough business out there for everyone. And as far as the customer is concerned, offering multiple solutions gives them more choice and more freedom, which cannot be a bad thing.

I agree that iSCSI has yet to make a significant dent in the enterprise, but there are now high-end, enterprise-class, deterministic iSCSI SAN solutions available that have satisfied customers from all over the globe. This progress is really starting to show, and will continue to grow as this newer, exciting technology becomes more widely accepted as a result of enterprises demanding a more aggressive return on investment than Fibre Channel (FC) can deliver.

However, by criticising iSCSI for combining block-level data access with slower

data rates because of the burden of TCP, Mr Hutsell demonstrates a misunderstanding of the current solutions available. TCP is processor-intensive, but to enable this protocol to run at wire speed, TCP Off-load Engine (TOE) Architecture is used. Vendors are also able to use storage controller modules to accelerate iSCSI. Of course, it's important to understand the differences between IP storage protocols: if customers wanted to link existing SAN islands they would not use iSCSI but would actually use Fibre Channel over IP or internet Fibre Channel Protocol.

Mr Hutsell applauds the speed of 4Gbit FC. Yet with iSCSI, we can trunk Ethernet together, which means we can actually offer up to 6Gbit or 8Gbit. And unlike FC, IP SAN solutions support Active/Active on the interfaces. Therefore all storage controllers provide a load balanced cluster and maximum throughput, rather than an Active/Passive configuration typical with FC, in which 50 per cent of the investment is on 'standby' in the event of failure.

And as far as InfiniBand is concerned, there must have been sound reasons for both Microsoft and Intel pulling out of this technology. To quote Microsoft's statement at the time: "Gigabit Ethernet technologies [iSCSI], while not as performant today as Infiniband, are now able to address the

demands of a higher range of server capabilities with no additional software or management expense." So why should anyone propose that customers invest additional money on Infiniband?

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