

Long Live VMS
By Joseph Marion

If an HP VAX or Alpha product could speak, it would say that “the proclamations of my death are greatly exaggerated.” HP Corporate sales would have you believe that the VAX world has long since passed away and the Alpha world will shortly follow. They will tell you that all roads lead to their new Itanium products. If they left the hallowed halls of Palo Alto and ventured into the real world, they would find this is just not true.

The real world sees customers continuing to focus on the former Digital and Compaq computing environments all based around the “deceased” VAX and Alpha products. (Remember, it was not so long ago that HP acquired Digital and Compaq.) These VAX and Alpha products are generally running the much under rated VMS operating system. VMS users call the operating system “bullet proof.”

Current estimates of VAX models still in productive service are in excess of 150,000 in the USA alone. Keeping in mind that the final VAX shipments were in 2000, the number of installed systems is incredible. The reliability of these aging systems is still extremely high. They are feature-rich, scaleable and they run VMS.

Many of the end users who are continuing to purchase VAX products often need this prior-generation equipment to keep a homogeneous computing environment that is no longer available new. Some may not need state of the art equipment. Others are either creating or maintaining disaster recovery sites that need to mirror existing data environments.

IT Managers who are looking to upgrade the performance on their VAX system should take a close look at Nemonix Engineering Inc. Nemonix Engineering sells the fastest Ethernet adapter available for VAX systems. Their Ultra-wide SCSI upgrades which replace slower technology is useful in attaching newer high speed tape subsystems and reducing backup times. Their memory and CPU upgrades will help you take advantage of VMS IO caching and other performance factors on your VAX.

There is a ready supply of VAX systems and spares on the secondary market. But, while VMS usage grows, the numbers of VAX users are diminishing by approximately 10% per year. This is largely due to the pressure from HP to migrate away from VAX. HP's maintenance costs have increase dramatically. Manufacturers often use increased maintenance costs as a way of making equipment obsolete. Loyal readers of this column know that when it costs more to own and operate a system than it does to replace it, that system is considered obsolete.

And what of the Alpha systems? OpenVMS engineers spent more than 200 man-years porting the OpenVMS OS to the Alpha architecture. As a result, a VAX to Alpha transition preserves the bulk of customer investment in software. The migration process is a relatively painless process in most cases. Users making this move on legacy applications that have been heavily customized need to be careful however. Often,

source code is missing, and specific hardware calls to VAX systems may have been written. Applications that have been customized will somewhat have a more complicated migration process.

HP is continuing development of OpenVMS and this 30 year old operating system is showing no signs of going away. In fact OpenVMS is holding on to its position at the heart of some of the world's most mission-critical systems. VMS continues to achieve double digit growth year on year with 10% to 15% of all VMS business coming from new users.

OpenVMS v8.2 is currently available for HP Integrity rx4640-8, rx2620-2, and rx1620-2 servers, as well as the entire family of AlphaServer systems. OpenVMS will be available on the full line of Integrity servers, including the HP Superdome Server, by the first half of 2006. If the move from VAX to Integrity is still too challenging for some legacy applications there are emulators that help to preserve the investment in this existing code.

The Charon VAX emulator runs on a dedicated windows server and mimics a variety of different VAX systems, unfortunately with the limitations imposed by the windows environment. There is also currently in test a VAX emulator that performs on the Alpha platform; it runs the standard VAX/VMS operating system and unmodified user applications without conversion.

Alpha and VMS are here for the long term. HP has indicated that low-end servers for the Alpha will be available from HP until at least the end of 2006 with high end servers available until the end of 2007. Want to save money on your Alpha equipment? Whether buying or selling, remember that there is a very active secondary market in this equipment and will be for many years to come. Go to www.ascdi.com to find a list of HP Alpha Dealers whom you can trust, worldwide.

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