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IBM Broadens Grid and Autonomic Services

By Charles King

IBM today introduced Grid and Autonomic Computing services that the company claimed will help customers gain competitive advantage in their respective industries. The new services involve experts from IBM Business Consulting Services and IBM Global Services, along with experts in emerging technologies from IBM Research.

The new offerings include:

- **IBM Grid Value at Work** – Provides customers with a detailed Total Cost of Ownership analysis and roadmap for Grid computing projects.
- **IBM Business Impact of Technology Services** – Assists customers in identifying the impact that Grid can have on key business processes, cost control, and revenue generation.
- **Grid Solution Deployment Services** – Helps customers assess and plan, design, implement, and run Grid deployments based on business goals. IBM Global Services can also assist customers in application migration and integration efforts.
- **Autonomic Computing Readiness Engagement Services** – Identifies opportunities for increasing systems management automation and creating frameworks for end-to-end infrastructure and application management needs.
- **Autonomic Computing Design and Implementation Services** – Uses IBM Global Services and IBM Research experts to assist in the design of self-configuring, self-healing, self-optimizing and self-protecting IT environments.

As part of the announcement, IBM said that Bowne & Co., a provider of document management solutions, is one of the first IBM customers to take advantage of the new services, with the goal of better responding to monthly and quarterly spikes in demand for the processing and printing of critical financial documents and to add processing power for unexpected, high-priority projects.

No pricing information for the new services was included in the announcement.

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For many in the IT community, grid computing has been the equivalent of the weather: an impossibly geeky subject better suited for conversation than meaningful deployments. But like most off the rack generalizations, this notion looks sharper than it fits. In a way, the ascendancy and success of off-the-rack commodity computing solutions have resulted in IT environments that look sharp on paper but do not adequately meet their users' business needs. On the plus side, grid solutions provide the means to nip and tuck those frumpy IT duds so they not only fit well but can be altered as a company's requirements change over time. While grid is not yet a shrink-wrapped IT solution, the days of grid use being limited to labs, research facilities, and similar locales rich in inhouse expertise are long gone. Growing numbers of companies are putting grid-enabled IT infrastructures to effective commercial use. However, given the complexity of

many grid deployments, why are these businesses getting excited about and committing financial and staff resources to such solutions?

The answer is both simple and sublime: properly designed and deployed, grids allow companies to better enjoy the inherent value and power of computing infrastructures, and to ensure efficient support for critical business processes. However, this notion runs counter to conventional enterprise wisdom, where IT customers have become so TCO and ROI sensitive that an undiscounted P.O. will send many into anaphylactic shock. To our way of thinking, these terminal bargain hunters are looking at their IT challenges through the wrong end of the telescope. Rather than focusing primarily on the price of a given solution, these businesses would be better served by clearly assessing their IT needs and determining how efficiently IT resources are being or could be used.

At its heart, a grid aims to maximally utilize all of the IT resources it encompasses. Rather than following the all-too-common practice of deploying stand-alone solutions to fit specific needs, and then tinkering with them as those need change, a grid enables IT resources to be allocated as and where they are needed, and to be increased or reduced as circumstances demand. Many enterprise IT shops resemble the crowded garage of a car nut, with a behemoth SUV crowding the weekend convertible, a sensible sedan blocked in by a stake bed truck, and a mini-van stuck in a corner with a rattletrap motorcycle leaned up against it. Follow this analogy, a grid offers users a single, highly flexible vehicle that can be altered to fit its driver's needs or wants.

Analogies aside, what does IBM's new grid service announcement have to do with any of this? Two things. First, the Value, Business Impact, and Deployment services provide businesses curious about grid the means to intelligently explore and consider the benefits a grid might offer them, as well as expert help in making grid computing a reality. The autonomic service offerings assist customers in determining how automated processes can enhance their end-to-end infrastructure and application needs, crucial elements in effective grid deployments. In both cases, IBM is simply leveraging its own considerable in-house grid experience and expertise in ways that benefit its customers.

Sounds great, right? Are these service offerings the key to a strategy that will help push IBM to the front of the pack and an eventual trip to the grid winner's circle? Well, maybe and maybe not. Problematically, early efforts in promising markets tend to be lonely adventures. The innocently or even purposefully ignorant are a tough crowd to work. While companies besides IBM are also developing grid solutions, vendors are waiting for businesses to catch up with grid as both a concept and an available solution. To that end, IBM's new service offerings provide customers concrete methods of measuring the potential benefits of grid, and of efficiently deploying grid environments. By educating its customers about grid, IBM is also demystifying a still relatively arcane technology with real-world applications and benefits. At the end of the day, by helping others IBM is also potentially helping itself. That is one sign of a business strategy with a good chance of success.