Better Living through Open Platforms: EMC Announces Centera Universal Access V2.1

By Charles King

EMC today announced Centera Universal Access 2.1, a new software solution that the company said allows customers to use EMC's Centera Content Addressed Storage (CAS) solutions to securely archive virtually any data type from any application running on any open platform. Using the new software along with Centera's open API, customers can archive data from applications that have been developed specifically for Centera or from applications running in Windows, UNIX, Linux, and mainframe environments that deploy industry-standard protocols. Centera Universal Access Version 2.1 natively provides support for all four of the major industry-standard protocols:

◇ Network File System (NFS) including IBM iSeries via Integrated File System (IFS) using NFS

◇ Common Internet File System (CIFS)

◇ File Transfer Protocol (FTP)

◇ Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP)

Centera can also be used to archive data from mainframe applications that are not integrated to Centera Universal Access with Bus-Tech, Inc.'s Mainframe Appliance for Storage (MAS) for Centera, which provides access via Enterprise Systems Connection (ESCON) or Fibre Connection (FICON) connections.

Pricing/Availability

EMC's Centera Universal Access 2.1 is now available. No pricing information was included in the announcement.

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While many regard industry-standard protocol support as arcane, at best, it is the sort of sweat-inducing work that tangibly improves the lives of enterprise end users and ISVs. It is also, not to put too fine a point on it, just the sort of effort that is required to help drive new or radically different IT architectures/solutions in order to extend their user and support base.

EMC's Centera is just such a solution. It is useful to remember that when EMC introduced Centera and CAS in April 2002, the notion of utilizing ATA disk drives for enterprise archiving applications was not well received by competitors who insisted that ATA technologies were not ready for business-critical prime time. When EMC announced the Centera Compliance Edition just over a year later, which extended Centera support for compliance-regulated archiving applications, the competitive din was even louder, especially among tape and optical storage vendors whose WORM solutions historically represented the state of the compliance art. Users, however, were more enthusiastic, especially given EMC's strategic decision to seek and gain regulatory approval before delivering Centera Compliance Edition to market; an action which largely muted the company's loudest critics.

So how does EMC's compliance archiving approach stand today? Quite prettily, overall. Since its introduction, EMC claims to have shipped over 7PB of Centera Compliance Edition capacity. More critically, approximately 250 business applications either have been, or are in the process of being, fully integrated with Centera's APIs. Perhaps most important of all, many of the competitors and critics who once pooh-poohed Centera have either launched or announced plans for their own ATA-based archiving solutions, and with good reason.

The fact is that Centera resulted from the simple realization that the continually evolving price/performance of ATA technology provided an opportunity for it to support reliable solutions that provide significantly faster performance than traditional tape and optical technologies at a significantly lower cost than enterprise-class disk drive products. As a result, EMC has been able to develop and deliver Centera as a distinctively separate enterprise solution that complements traditional archiving technologies while delivering essentially new classes of service.

Given this context, what is Centera Universal Access 2.1 all about? Two things. First, by providing support for all four major industry-standard data protocols, EMC has significantly expanded the potential Centera customer and developer bases to include any who are working with UNIX, Linux, Windows, and mainframe applications; i.e., pretty much everyone on the planet. In addition, by natively supporting these protocols, EMC is extending a handshake to developers and customers who do not have the time or resources to integrate their applications with Centera's APIs on their own. This feature is likely to be especially welcomed by customers with homegrown applications or limited development resources, and ISVs developing time-to-market-sensitive products.

In addition, by providing Universal Access 2.1, EMC is helping to keep Centera and CAS at the head of the new breed data archiving pack. While many vendors are moving toward or forward with ATA-based solutions, EMC has been careful to position Centera as more than just a low-cost disk array. By working with ISVs who leverage Centera's capabilities across a wide range of vertical and horizontal solutions, EMC is extending its original definition of Content Addressed Storage to embrace a widening pool of enterprise applications and customers. Overall, EMC's Universal Access 2.1 is designed to make the work of Centera ISVs and customers considerably easier, and will likely stand as yet another strategic benchmark the company's data archiving competitors will be obliged to follow.

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