

InsidePerspective

ACHIEVE THE POWER OF MEDITECH

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Tasting the Wind: Virtualization, JJWild, and Perot Systems Healthcare

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The theme of this issue “One Year Later” severely tempts me to resort to an introverted philosophical bloviation on the significance of change in the way societies live, corporations behave, governments govern, and individuals grow. You might just as easily solicit that advice from a fortune cookie at the end of a particularly satisfying Chinese dinner. If we did happen to be sharing some Peking Ravioli and a little Kung Pao Chicken, odds are someone would bring up virtualization. So let’s see where the dinner discussion leads us.

Virtualization: It isn’t just for SANs and LANs anymore. The people at IBM must get a lot of laughs out of this one. They invented virtualization 42 years ago so that people could get maximum use of their multi-million dollar mainframe computers. It’s a testament to how far the Intel x86 architecture—originally envisioned only for PC desktops—has come that an entire industry is now wrapped around making x86 servers mainframe-class. This is good news for healthcare. As our industry begins to explore the real power of advanced clinical software to actively assist in the management of patient outcomes, desktop-level reliability in our data centers is not good enough.

Virtualization lets you create that mainframe you always wanted out of a list of parts that you probably already own: PC Servers, Storage Area Networks, Local Area Networks. Yes, I get excited, too, about all the other cool things about virtualization: 12-18 month payback times on reduced capital and operational expenditures, the slow but steady greening of data centers, and the possibilities to enhance disaster recovery. However, at the risk of being redundant (I prefer to think of it as “fault tolerant”) I still believe the real key benefit of virtualization is in the ability to manage IT assets fluidly in response to the real needs of your organization. Without virtualization, you only can manage server, storage, and network assets as discrete physical blocks, all bounded by an endless variety of criteria like relative performance, application lifecycles, data flows, leasing arrangements, and maintenance contracts. By abstracting the computing resources from their physical boundaries, virtualization makes your application of these assets more fluid, more precise, and more appropriate to the mission of your organization.

By its very nature, virtualization changes workflows in IT. Discrete servers and storage assets become part of resource pools, centrally managed from a Web UI; some network connections become virtual rather than physical, requiring a click on a UI rather than a walk to the wiring closet.

However, creating this more ordered IT universe takes some thought and planning. Servers and storage must be selected carefully and standardized to the greatest degree possible in order to gain full benefit from the resource pooling and management effect of VMWare. Networks need to be reviewed as they bear inherently multiplexed data streams that are wider, deeper, and more critical than before. Your network is now truly the system bus of the virtual mainframe. At the end of this process however, an important, measurable result should be that your staff spends less hours managing technology and more hours delivering the power of your MEDITECH applications.

It really isn't too much of a stretch to apply this analogy to the acquisition of JJWild by Perot Systems. JJWild grew over time to mean different things to different people. To some, we were hands-on partners in the implementation of key technologies. To others, we were the consultants who helped them get the full benefit from their MEDITECH applications. Whatever we became was bounded by a number of physical realities which many of our customers deal with in their own roles—the ability to add key employees and skill sets, the ability to finance growth and change, and the ability to choose the right opportunities for applying our understanding.

As VMWare does for servers, Perot Systems Healthcare becomes the “virtualization layer” that captures the essence of JJWild and makes it more accessible, reliable, scalable, and manageable for more of our customers to a broader healthcare audience in a way that may have taken us many years to achieve on our own.

Virtualization technology itself is a great example of “the Perot effect” on JJWild. In reviewing our options for creating a new hosting service—MSite—that would support multiple generations of MEDITECH applications and the potential migrations between them, we began to see virtualization as a critical tool in efficiently managing customer workloads across a grid architecture in highly available “pod” configurations. The thinking, research, and planning around the use of virtualization in this hosting environment benefits all of our customers—those who will continue to manage their applications in their internal data centers, as well as those who ultimately choose to allow us the privilege of hosting their applications at MSite or their recovery replicas at JSite.

Rethinking workflows, challenging our assumptions, separating the gold from the dross—virtualization does this for technology as change does for corporations. As we evolve to become Perot Systems MEDITECH Solutions, I believe the fundamental essence of what made JJWild special remains and is even amplified within Perot Systems' culture: deep commitment to our customers, caring for each other, and continuing to stay a little bit “wild” along the way.

What technical topics perplex you the most? Fitzy wants to know! Send your thoughts and concerns to editor@jjwild.com and you never know what will pop up in the next issue.