How to minimize server consolidation mistakes

Look out for underpowered servers, configuration snafus and scalability issues.

By John Edwards
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Computerworld - Joe Latrell, IT manager and lead programmer at GetMyHomesValue.com, a real estate data services company in Lancaster, Pa., knows that it's all too easy for even a knowledgeable and experienced IT veteran to make mistakes while managing a complex server-consolidation project. "You have to think about everything," he says. "It can be a minefield."

Server virtualization projects are usually easy to justify on both financial and operational grounds, but that doesn't make them foolproof to execute. Pitfalls such as inadequate planning, faulty assumptions or failure to quickly detect postdeployment glitches can entrap consolidation project leaders and team members at almost every stage.

"Every time [we] felt that we covered every base, that every single thing had been looked at, that's when the danger started," says Latrell, whose project experienced a variety of woes, including underpowered servers, configuration snafus and budget constraints.

Avoiding disaster while keeping a complicated consolidation project on schedule and within budget isn't easy. In fact, Latrell believes that making at least a few mistakes along the way is inevitable. "It will go wrong: Be prepared," he warns. "On the other hand, planning and learning from others will keep you from making the big and obvious mistakes."

Server Projects Require Homework

Five steps to planning a successful server-consolidation project:

Begin with research. Having a solid understanding of the various consolidation techniques and technologies will help you pinpoint the approach that best meets your needs.

Set operational and financial goals. Identify exactly what you hope to accomplish in terms of scope, performance and costs before you begin designing the system.

Create a schedule. To minimize disruption to everyday business and IT operations, set a timeline with defined benchmarks. Be sure to build in some extra time to accommodate inevitable project setbacks.

Put it in writing. A document describing project goals, system design details, integration specifics, server management responsibilities and other key points will help you, your team

While even the most thorough planning can't completely eliminate project mistakes, building a detailed virtualization design and deployment strategy will help minimize the number of gotchas, says Justin Gallagher, senior IT consultant at KDSA Consulting LLC in North Andover, Mass.

"People aren't spending enough time

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Build support. As with any major IT project, getting buy-in from stakeholders is essential for a successful consolidation initiative. Make sure your business users understand the benefits, and potential pitfalls, of virtualization.

—John Edwards

thinking about the issues of the existing workloads and how you migrate those into a virtual environment, and what does that mean in terms of cost structure, ongoing expense and high availability," adds Jeff Nessen, IT consolidation practice manager at Logicalis, a systems integrator in Bloomfield Hills, Mich.

Gallagher says that consolidation planning also needs to address an organization's future needs, such as anticipated growth. "Look at what you're going to do a year, three years and five years from now," he suggests. "You don't want to get yourself in a situation where you do this whole big upgrade and then you find you need more [server capacity] later on."

Jason Cooper, a consultant at C/D/H Technology Consultants in Grand Rapids, Mich., agrees that every consolidation plan needs to address scalability. "We often run into issues with organizations that either didn't allocate enough storage or simply didn't correctly anticipate the amount of server power that was going to be needed to facilitate their server consolidation project," he says.

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