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HP leaps into cloud computing with lackluster lineup

Enterprise IT shops may not think of Hewlett-Packard as a technological leader. Sure, the company sells a lot of ink and printers, but when it comes to servers, it's one of a crowd of identical x86 offerings and hardly the touchstone for innovation.

> Many customers...will not shift to [HP] just for simplicity.
>
> Forrester analyst Stefan Ried

But that's apparently something HP is trying to change, as the company last week unveiled a set of cloud computing services and products that plants it right in the path of other major IT suppliers. Can the stalwart computer hardware supplier compete? It's hard to say; its products are not revolutionary, and HP has a ways to go in convincing customers it's got the goods to be a cloud player.

For example, Chris House, technical engineer for Metro Health, a Midwestern medical provider, operates a healthy deployment of HP blade servers and has started looking into automated deployment of virtual machines and ways to meter usage.

House said that some of HP's new line up might fit the bill. At first glance, however, it appeared to him to be existing technology rebranded into a new product line. "The only new thing is the HP Cloud Service Automation," he said.

Analyzing HP's cloud products

The products are "…sort of pulling together of existing technologies with a few additions," said The 451 Group chief analyst John Abbott. He said that the Infrastructure as a Service (IaaS) component was the freshest part of the package, but even that was something where HP had some previous grounding. It bought outsourcing giant EDS in 2008, which had run hosting operations and even on-demand infrastructure for quite some time.

Abbott pointed out that HP's new IaaS doesn't even run the same software and hardware that it's pitching to customers; it's running on the HP high-availability Integrity line, since the new CloudSystem line doesn't have the kind of scalability that HP needs for a service offering. For instance, HP's Integrity line includes the Superdome, a well-established high availability blade server/converged hardware offering that HP has been touting for several years.

Superdome runs HP-UX11 and, depending on how you squint, could be considered a bare metal foundation for a cloud computing environment. It meets all the requirements but doesn't necessarily have the self-service, end-user friendly capabilities normally associated with cloud.

It's telling that HP is not offering IaaS on the same platform as its own cloud products, CloudSystem and Cloud Service Automation (CSA). It's also a prime example of the essential smoke-and-mirrors of cloud computing; HP's own cloud products aren't battle tested yet, but it can offer the basic on-demand service to consumers with substitutions.

HP's new cloud computing lineup:

Enterprise Cloud Service-Compute: HP says its Enterprise Cloud Services-Compute (IaaS) will be

offered to existing qualified (i.e., large) customers only. It will be sold on-demand, like Amazon Web Services (if you can get into the party) and the company is touting easy integration with existing management systems. HP wants you to think of ECS-Compute as an extension of your in-house infrastructure. Pricing is hammered out per customer.

HP CloudSystem: HP's cloud-in-a-box. This is a preconfigured rack appliance based on the BladeSystem Matrix. It's preloaded with HP's Cloud Service Automation (CSA) software and has a portal interface for users to provision resources. HP says it will tie directly into the ECS-Compute service and allow for hybrid clouds that users can handle with their own management. It will also be compatible with non-HP storage and networking products.

Cloud Service Automation: The core of the HP cloud offering is an amalgam of HP's OpenView system's management and Opsware's virtualization and automation software. HP also turned recent acquisition Stratavia into **Cloud Maps for BladeSystem Matrix**. An application stack management tool, Cloud Maps lets IT shops create, configure and provision templates of virtual servers and applications. It comes preconfigured for use with SAP, Oracle, Citrix and other enterprise applications.

HP says that its ECS-Compute service will be fully compatible with its CloudSystem box and its CSA platform; it can make that promise because the company's in the driver's seat on service delivery. But can a user buy a CloudSystem and get the same performance HP says it can deliver? Probably not.

Is HP too late into the cloud?

The 451 Group's Abbott said that HP's late entry into enterprise cloud services hasn't changed the competitive landscape much. Even though it's playing catch-up on actual cloud computing products when compared to rivals IBM and Dell (and to a much lesser degree Oracle, CA and BMC), enterprise cloud is a very long-term goal at this point.

"[HP's] had to build out its stack, but it's been doing that for some time," he said. "[For instance], it used to be terrible at the software side, but it's been getting its act together for the last few years."

Abbott said there's another factor in play, too. HP may not aggressively pursue enterprises because it knows that, for most HP customers, its equipment is already a basic commodity and enterprises aren't going to be the long-term major transformative cloud purveyors.

"In about five years, the main target for high-end hardware will be telcos and big service providers," he said. "It'll move out of the mid-level enterprise."

HP says that true public cloud, like Amazon Web Services or Rackspace, is something the company is working on but isn't ready to talk about yet. That would be an interesting direction for the IT giant, since it just spent five years consolidating to five data centers worldwide (minus research operations). It almost certainly has the high-octane compute capacity to compete with Amazon and probably even offer cheaper service, but it definitely doesn't have the expertise in selling to the public.

Bandwidth is the rub, not hardware

However, it's arguable whether or not cloud services need to come from traditional vendors these days. Matt Clark, IT director for a major electronics firm, said enterprises interested in cloud computing should wait and see whose products are actually delivered.

"IT shops should just hold out for another nine to 12 months. By then, the guessing game will be over and clear leaders will emerge," he said.

Clark said what he spends on servers is split equally between HP, Cisco and Oracle. He would like to pursue private cloud, but the hardware layer isn't his primary concern.

"Personally, since so much data will be going in and out of our internal networks, the data transport costs will be a large factor," he said. "We have been working very closely with our various telcos [and service providers]."

If a private cloud platform comes around, Clark said that he'll take it or leave it on the merits. As for HP's new public cloud offerings, he felt his firm was unlikely to go out to anyone's cloud, even a trusted big-name IT brand.

"I don't see us buying anything from HP or IBM in the public cloud space at this time," he said. Clark added that for security and compliance reasons, it's in the corporate interest to keep data operations close to the company.

Cloud purveyor déjà vu?

If all of this sounds a little familiar, well, it is. IBM's CloudBurst appliance and Cisco's Unified Computing Systems have been in play for almost two years now, and even Oracle beat HP to the punch with its Exalogic appliances last year. All those companies, and even Dell, have software stacks and hardware ready to go for a private cloud deployment.

HP isn't known for its agility, despite owning EDS and selling IT services. Big enterprise-scale managed service providers (MSPs) are much better positioned to compete on public clouds than HP is. Forrester analyst Stefan Ried noted that billion-dollar MSP T-Systems had recently launched an AWS clone for its enterprise customers in Europe that is far more likely to see action than HP's less agile and less developed ECS-Compute offering.

Ried added that many enterprises were already taking advantage of cloud computing infrastructure in myriad ways, and the attraction to single-source vendors was weak in the cloud world.

"Many customers might have picked already a combination of two extremes, like IBM and Amazon, and will not shift to [HP] just for simplicity," he said.

UPDATE: *HP spokesman Christian Verstraete responded to this article to say that the HP ECS-Compute infrastructure does, in fact, run on the same core BladeSystem Matrix components that make up the new CloudSystem appliances, but the software and configuration HP runs in its own data centers is not identical to what is shipped in the CloudSystem appliances.*

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