

FEATURE

Should You Make the Leap?



By Carol Sliwa

Computerworld | Nov 19, 2001

Ask IT managers about their upgrade plans for Windows .Net Server, and their initial reaction may be puzzlement. Many users—and even some industry analysts—are unaware that Microsoft Corp. chose that name for the successor to its Windows 2000 Server operating system. Windows .Net Server had long been code-named Whistler (and briefly dubbed Windows 2002 Server) before getting its present moniker in June.

But now that Windows .Net Server will miss its original year-end ship date, users will have some extra time to learn about the new server operating system. Microsoft officials say the product won't ship until the first half of next year, and some analysts predict that it won't arrive until June.

For many corporate users, the delay will hardly be noticed. Companies generally have been slow to migrate to Windows 2000 Server—particularly if they've had to plot a move to Microsoft's new Active Directory. And plenty of corporations are still running applications on Windows NT 4.x Server, with no immediate plans to change.

Companies with NT 4.x Server shouldn't wait for Windows .Net Server, advises Cliff Reeves, Microsoft's vice president of marketing for Windows .Net Server. They "should absolutely think about Windows 2000," he emphasizes, insisting that Windows NT is simply "the camel's nose in the tent of the enterprise," while Windows 2000 is "a very strong, more-than-credible product in that space."

By most accounts, the Windows 2000 family—which includes Server, Advanced Server and Datacenter Server versions—has lived up to its billing as more stable, reliable and scalable than Windows NT 4.x Server. "The performance itself is dramatically better," says Tom Manter, an analyst at Aberdeen Group Inc. in Boston. "The real question from the business perspective is, Can they afford to wait for .Net Server?"

Windows .Net Server—which will have Standard Server, Enterprise Server, Datacenter Server and new single-purpose Web Server versions—doesn't represent the major leap forward that Windows 2000 Server did, analysts say. Tom Bittman, an analyst at Gartner Inc. in Stamford, Conn., says Microsoft's Whistler investment has focused on consumer clients. "This wasn't set up as a release for enterprises," Bittman says. "We see this as a major service pack or as a point release."

There are some potentially useful—albeit incremental—improvements in Windows .Net Server. However, industry analysts advise users to evaluate the operating system on a feature-by-feature basis to see if their companies would benefit from them.

Active Directory, for instance, will be enhanced to support LDAP-based single-connection authentication of multiple users and the widely used inetOrgPerson class of objects for identifying users. IT managers will also see replication between domain controllers improved and gain the ability to load directory content from tapes, CDs or DVDs and establish root-level trust among forests of users.

But in order to benefit from the new features, all Windows 2000 domain controllers must be upgraded to Windows .Net domain controllers, since the newer operating system will detect any old domain controllers and disable all features that are incompatible.

Gartner analyst John Enck predicts that most of his clients won't see enough value in the new Active Directory features to justify the upgrade. "For most companies that have put a lot of energy into deploying Windows 2000 servers, it makes the most sense to skip .Net Server and wait for the next release," he says.

Windows .Net Server's biggest target audience will be application developers, according to Reeves. Developers should find it easier to write Web applications and Web services because of the new operating system's built-in support for the .Net framework.

The .Net framework incorporates a unified set of class libraries and the Common Language Runtime (CLR), letting applications written in more than 20 supported languages run on Windows .Net Server. Another key piece is ASP.Net, which is the code that handles the dynamic calls that connect a Web page to a Web application.

"If you want to take advantage of low-cost, Intel-based hardware to build what can be sophisticated applications, you've now got a much easier, straightforward, cost-effective way to go about doing it," says analyst Will Zachmann at Meta Group Inc. in Stamford, Conn.

But unless a corporation is using Windows .Net Server for Web application development and wants the new Internet Information Server 6.0, it may not see a compelling case for change. Even if a company is focused on that area, it may not need to make an instant switch.

Kollen Glynn, vice president of product development at EarthConnect Corp. in Seattle, notes that his company was one of the first to do commercial Web services work for the financial industry. He says he'd like to use Windows .Net Server, but in the meantime, it's not difficult to load the CLR onto his company's Windows 2000 servers.

"If that were the only reason you were switching to .Net Server, that wouldn't be a reason," Glynn says, noting that Microsoft has made it easy to install the .Net framework.

Glynn is more curious to explore the 64-bit capability Microsoft promises in its next Datacenter offering, since he could use more addressable memory for back-end databases.

Datacenter is Microsoft's challenger to high-end Unix systems, but that market has been tough to crack. "The demand for those is just really starting to evolve, with the Itanium processors from Intel starting to get out there," says Dwight Davis, an analyst at Boston-based Summit Strategies Inc.

Bittman advises users not to leap to the 64-bit servers right away. "Let the application developers work with it for a while, and wait for the second generation of hardware," he says.

Some companies may see benefits in the enhanced management features of Windows .Net Server. Bellevue, Wash.-based digiMine Inc., which has been beta-testing the new operating system, hosts data warehouses for more than 40 customers on Windows 2000 Advanced Server and SQL Server 2000. When upgrading the service, digiMine now must send customers an installation file, new code and instructions. But Windows .Net Server can be set up to make sure a customer is using the most current version of the application—and provide the update if it's not.

"The management of the application can now be controlled remotely," says Bassel Ojeh, digiMine's chief operating officer.

Improved performance and ease of use will drive Stephen Vickory, a project manager at Pomeroy Computer Resources Inc. in Greensboro, N.C., to switch to Windows .Net Server. "You're not going to have to be a rocket scientist to use it anymore," Vickory says, citing the improved wizards and help features in the beta version he's testing.

Whether features such as that will drive massive upgrades remains to be seen. Analysts say companies that may have been forced to delay IT projects due to economic conditions might want to consider deploying Windows .Net Server if they haven't started their Windows 2000 Server deployments by the middle of next year.

But users who just installed Windows 2000 or have plans to do so in the next six months probably won't be champing at the bit to get their hands on Windows .Net Server.

"The norm is, 'Don't go.' It's not worth the ROI," says Bittman. "Skip this release and wait for the next one."