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CGC Delivers Hosted HA with Avnet and iCluster

by Alex Woodie

The 600 or so commercial construction firms that run Computer Guidance Corp.'s i OS-based ERP package were given new high availability (HA) and disaster recovery (DR) options last month. CGC tapped Avnet for space in a level IV data center and IBM for its iCluster (formerly Datamirror's) HA software for the new offering, which requires a two-year commitment. The company is also close to unveiling a new hosted option for production environments, too.

CGC is a Scottsdale, Arizona, software company that develops a construction management system (CMS) used by mid- and large-size contractors and other companies in the construction industry with revenues of more than \$100 million. Its flagship product, eCMS, provides an array of financial accounting, project management, and bidding capabilities, and runs exclusively on the IBM i (OS/400) platform, which still has a strong following in the commercial construction business.

For years, CGC has provided DR services for clients who have experienced a natural disaster or other outage that takes down an AS/400. Customers could ship backup tapes to CGC headquarters, where they're loaded onto CGC's equipment, enabling the customer to reclaim some processing capability in the meantime before rebuilding its own AS/400 environment.

CGC sales director Bill Craig recalls one DR event. "We had one customer, a union contractor, who went down on Sunday night, and they had to produce payroll checks on Tuesday. That was part of their contract," he says. "They shipped us their tape overnight on Sunday, on Monday we got them up and running on our system so on Tuesday they could cut their checks."

While CGC provided DR as an unofficial value-added service, the software company decided it was time to formalize the offering--and most importantly, add an HA component with the help of IBM and Tempe, Arizona-based Avnet, Craig says.

"Based on the types of companies that we have as customers, there was definitely a need for a high availability option," Craig says. "We solicit feedback from customers, and that was one of the requests that came up, so we developed several options for high availability. We partnered closely with IBM, which has the iCluster software, and Avnet, which is a key business partner with a level IV data center. It just made a lot of sense."

CGC's hosted HA offerings offer three levels of isolation for customers' operating environments and different recovery time objectives. At the lower end of the spectrum is an "environmental" option that uses basic i OS technologies to segregate replicated data from multiple companies on the same backup box.

The middle tier employs logical partitioning (LPAR) technology for customers who demand more isolation from other customers. An entirely separate backup AS/400 server is provisioned and managed for customers who demand total isolation from other customers.

"The most cost effective is to have a shared box, just in case something happens," Craig says. "Depending on the offering they select, it gives them various response times."

The Disaster Recovery Data Center is located in Avnet's level IV data center, the highest rating reserved for the most advanced, secure, and redundant data centers. "We selected Avnet's data center because of our long-standing relationship, their world-class facility, and the fact IBM relies on it for their disaster recovery," says Deb Canning, IT manager for CGC.

CGC currently has about 30 customers subscribed to tape-based DR services, Craig says, and has strong interest in the hosted HA offering from about 10 customers. There's "a lot of interest in that," says Craig, who expects it to "grow substantially in the near future."

Hosted HA is one of the few bright spots in the midrange these days. SunGard Availability Services recently started building a reseller channel for its HA and DR services. Vault400 and SafeData are also offering hosted HA, and Maximum Availability just last week unveiled a software as a service (SaaS) option for its *noMAX HA package with partner Network Services Plus Inc. (NSPI), which maintains an army of System i servers in its Atlanta, Georgia, data center.

Pricing for CGC's HA option is dependent on many factors, and was not disclosed. Customers are required to sign a contract extending from 24 to 60 months. However, customers may pay for only a year at a time, Craig says.

In the next few months, CGC is expected to expand beyond hosted HA with a new hosted option for production eCMS environments. The new offering won't require customers to invest a cent in hardware--except for PCs or thin clients to run the Web browsers that deliver eCMS interfaces.

"We'll host the application at our data center," Craig says. "You don't have to worry about maintaining it, or installing service packs, patches, or new releases. You don't have to worry about security. It's a really nice model, to some of our exiting customers and new prospects as well, in terms of keeping the cost down."

For more information on CGC's new hosted HA and DR offerings, see the company's Web site at www.computerguidance.com.