

Mainframe alternative vendor PSI hopes IBM will see the light in open systems

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Storage & Systems

MARKET DEVELOPMENT

12 September 2005

Event Summary

- The past few months must have been somewhat discouraging for lone mainframe plug-compatible systems vendor Platform Solutions (PSI), as it watched IBM launch upgraded mainframe hardware – the z9 – along with a new level of virtualization capabilities.
- But PSI claims the zSeries enhancements are 'the ultimate form of flattery' and that IBM has taken notice of its messaging and assimilated it. Virtualization, it says, is the key component for bringing open systems and z/OS together.
- Although IBM isn't getting in PSI's way, it's not helping much either. PSI believes it represents the last chance for the industry to have an alternative choice in a crucial market sector. Z/OS needs more than one source if the market is to expand.

The 451 take

IBM should get off the fence. It may not be stopping PSI, but it's not supporting it much either. If it really wants to open up mainframe technology and keep sales growing, then a set of third-party infrastructure providers – hardware and software – will do it more good than harm. Those who predicted the death of the mainframe 10 years ago have been proven wrong, because there's still a need for a stable, mature and large-scale platform for maintaining data with no integrity problems. But applications are being developed on open systems, and it makes little sense to run apps somewhere else than where your data is. PSI offers an answer to some of these problems, and IBM could benefit. A partnership could help bring z/OS to a wider audience.

Details

IBM is getting the message – mainframes may still be the best platform for customers who require 100% data integrity, but they also need to be able to run and manage open systems software at the same time. The new 54-processor z9 mainframe, which ships this month, doubles the performance (to 600Mips) and memory (to 512GB) of the current z990 mainframe, and also doubles the number of logical partitions available to 60. It can run Java programs through the zSeries Application Assist Processor and Linux through the Integrated Facility for Linux. The z9 also runs the updated version of IBM's Virtualization Engine (2.0) released earlier this year.

This takes IBM closer to the multi-OS environment virtualization touted by **Platform Solutions**, the **Amdahl** spinoff that's currently beta testing its Itanium-based P5000 64-way (and later 128-way with the dual-core Montecino) plug-compatible mainframe. PSI's system can run Linux, Unix and Windows natively while its virtualization layer runs z/OS. It can also take advantage of third-party hardware developments for Itanium such as chipsets and encryption PCI-X cards. **LLBean** has been a well-publicized test customer, but PSI says it will limit early shipments to five by the year's end to iron out the bugs and fine-tune support. General availability is set for early next year. Negotiations with mainframe-oriented ISVs are currently under way.

Competitive landscape

Users don't want to be solely reliant on IBM for mainframe technology, a situation they've had to live with since the late 1990s when **Fujitsu** and **Hitachi** pulled out of the plug-compatible mainframe business. PSI believes its existence is already putting pressure on IBM to be more competitive, much as **Advanced Micro Devices** is doing with **Intel** over 64-bit computing, despite AMD's small share of the market when compared with Intel. IBM is shifting toward the open world but isn't likely to go as far as PSI in terms of flexibility. Modularity is one example. IBM's large uniprocessor engine size means the entry-level price is still high. Software is another vital area. IBM has been buying up mainframe independent software vendors such as **Candle** and increasingly competing against the remaining independent software houses. These companies could see PSI as a means of survival and help keep the third-party z/OS software market alive.

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