



ClearCube upgrades management tools to work with independent PCs

Analyst: John Abbott
Sector: Storage & Systems
March 18, 2003

ClearCube, the PC blade company, has upgraded its management software and also launched the first software for platforms other than its own. Some elements of the company's CMS management suite can now be used to manage boxed PCs, as well as PC blades racked within the company's own chassis.

Impact assessment

The message

ClearCube has pioneered the idea of centralizing the management of PCs into a rack of blades, while separating out the front-end systems for remote operation across standard CAT5 cable. Now it's putting more emphasis on the management tools, and broadening out support to include boxed PCs as well as blades.

Competitive landscape

KVM switch specialist Avocent, which acquired a small company called 2C last August, is the primary competitor in this space. Others may join in, but ClearCube reckons it has some key patents that might restrict what other companies can offer.

The451 take

The ClearCube product, and those of Avocent, have mostly been restricted to niche markets so far - although the financial, healthcare and government niches are sizable enough for a small firm. It's an interesting twist on the 'thin client' computing story.

Context

ClearCube has forged something of a niche for itself by applying the blade server concept to PCs. Multiple PC blades, stacked inside ClearCube racks, provide the engines for remote PC displays, with keyboard, mouse and USB-attached peripherals attached via a small desktop box called the C/Port. These remote desktops can be linked up to 200m away. The six-year-old Texas company has some key patents, including one covering its business methodology that could restrict competitors from offering similar products. Customers in the financial, healthcare and government sectors have been the most receptive so far.

The original version of CMS included a blade manager, switch manager, data failover and an image manager, the first three specific to the ClearCube units, which fit eight PC units into a 3U rack. The blade manager, built on top of the LANdesk Client Manager, handles asset management and health monitoring, while the switch and data failover products enable users to be switched instantly to a spare blade in case of failure. These three are necessarily architecture-specific. The image manager is a re-branded version of PowerQuest's DeployCenter.

Products

The two independent modules are Data Failover with PeerSynch and Move Manager. ClearCube says it built the new modules after it looked in vain on the open market for some of the functionality it needed. Data Failover with PeerSynch is a peer-to-peer backup and recovery tool that takes advantage of the storage space that typically goes unused within a PC.

Most PCs now have 40GB drives, while most individual users in a corporate environment need only about 5GB. The tool backs up user files and, unusually, local settings as well on one or more other PC modules without requiring dedicated hardware. The PeerSynch portion manages the removal and re-insertion of peers after power-down, failures or removal, re-synchronizing them when they come back online.

The second independent module is Move Manager, which automates the movement of individual users or groups of users from one physical location to another. It transfers a user's full hard drive image from the original PC to the new one via the network. Operations can be scheduled to happen after hours or on weekends. The product can also schedule full hard drive backups of standard PCs or blades. Move Manager requires Data Failover to run. Two of the other CMS modules, blade manager and switch manager, have been upgraded to version 3 but remain tied to ClearCube's proprietary hardware.

Strategy

Senior technologist Kenneth Knotts says that ClearCube remains focused on its hardware and will generally write software that complements its own hardware. It's not aiming to transform itself into another desktop configuration and management company. But the move is an acknowledgment that, when users buy ClearCube's rack-based PC systems, they don't throw away their existing PCs, and so need support for a mixed environment.

As a result of the new software releases, ClearCube's CMS suite will now consist of Switch Manager, Data Failover and Move Manager. Blade Manager is bundled in with each ClearCube blade. Image Manager will revert back to its PowerQuest branding, and the CMS management console - which was a re-branded version of the LANDesk management suite - will be discontinued. Customers who want it will be referred direct to LANDesk.

Competition

On the software side, ClearCube might be considered to be moving into the territory of PowerQuest and LANDesk, although in reality, it's really only likely to sell into its own user base. The more intriguing competitive analysis comes from the hardware side, where a sizable company, Avocent, is now making its first moves following the acquisition of 2C Computing last August. Other keyboard video mouse controller specialists, such as Raritan, are likely to follow.

Currently, ClearCube is the only company offering a custom rack of PC blades to act as the back-end, centrally managed compute engine. Avocent is instead marketing its product for use with existing racks of PCs. ClearCube's Knotts hints that his company's business practice patent may be the reason for this. If others offer a similar combination, they may find themselves in violation of those patents.

That situation may be coming to a head, as Avocent is looking for blade server partners to adapt their existing systems to host remote PC displays. For its part, Avocent can claim the 'open systems' high ground as it adapts its CStation technology to work with existing equipment and software from multiple vendors. That approach might also appeal to users not wanting to buy any new hardware. And Avocent claims a technical advantage, in that it uses a digital, rather than analog, signal, which preserves video quality over longer distances. ClearCube admits this can be a problem, and is working on a fiber version for the future.

SWOT analysis

Strengths

ClearCube has established itself in some lucrative niche markets, and probably has just about as much business as it can handle at the moment.

Weaknesses

Its somewhat unique approach may hold back wider deployments. It's not possible to use the ClearCube system with existing hardware, which means new equipment must be purchased.

Opportunities

Other markets traditionally served by thin client terminal companies might also be interested in the ClearCube approach. And opening out the management software to work with existing PCs may also broaden its market reach.

Threats

Avocent is a larger company, and has some established relationships with OEM partners. It also has a technical advantage through use of digital communications.