

What Now for Informix Customers?

An Executive White Paper

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Introduction

The cloud of dust created by the recent purchase of the Informix Software's database business by IBM is beginning to settle. We consider the options for Informix product customers.

History

In April 2001, IBM announced its intention to acquire the assets of Informix Software – Informix's database business – in a cash transaction valued at \$1 billion. The sale was duly completed in July 2001, and by May 2002 had allowed IBM to claim the position of overall market-share leader, according to Gartner Dataquest. IBM's 34.6% of market share, as measured by new licences sold, eclipsed that of the previous market leader, Oracle Corporation, whose share stood at 34%. Oracle Corporation disputes these figures, but what *is* certain is that the acquisition has brought IBM very close to, if not actually to, the top spot.

But the facts do not tell the full story: IBM's apparent dominance comes from two highly disparate product families, the IBM flagship database, DB2, and from Informix's various database offerings: principally from its leading database, Informix Dynamic Server (IDS), but also from older products such as XPS, Informix OnLine and Informix SE, plus various databases that Informix picked up through acquisitions, such as Red Brick Warehouse.

The products have very different antecedents: DB2 has been around since the early 1980s, originally as a mainframe-based database manager, and although IBM, during the intervening years, has been successful at scaling DB2 to other platforms, such as AS/400 and UNIX, the product remains both in perception and in reality a mainframe product. IBM has a long way to go to convince the broader markets that DB2 is a fast, reliable and viable option on non-mainframe platforms.

Informix however was designed specifically for UNIX servers - the "-ix" suffix actually comes from the word UNIX - and although it too has seen some ports, notably to NT, it remains a UNIX-based product. IDS is generally regarded - particularly by Informix technical aficionados, who are fiercely protective of their favourite - as a technically-accomplished product with a low maintenance overhead. Indeed, IDS and its ancestors, Informix SE and Informix OnLine, are running day after day, year after year, with little or no intervention in many customer sites with which Informix, courtesy of its chaotic administration, has managed to lose touch.

Early Uncertainty

Early and inevitable uncertainty abounded over whether IBM would continue to support and develop both DB2 and Informix. To its credit, IBM moved quickly to try to make its intentions clear. It pressed ahead with a new release of IDS, 9.3, in October 2001, and furthermore committed itself to releases 9.4 and 9.5, which if adhered to will guarantee the availability of IDS as a discrete product until 2005.

IBM has also been keen to point out its honourable track record in continuing support for products whose original developers it has purchased, such as Lotus Notes. Nonetheless, a number of Informix customers that we know looked at moving there and then, an option made more attractive by Oracle's marketing campaign offering large discounts on its licences to would-be defectors.

However, although Oracle's marketing machine was typically quick to spot a potential and legitimate opportunity, the migration technology underpinning what would be a major upheaval for any company was deficient for large data volumes, and in fact absent in entirety for the most recent IDS v9 technologies, causing at least one major Informix customer in the United Kingdom to adopt a "wait-and-see" approach.

Today's Prognosis

If one peers into the middle distance and beyond, it is difficult to see a continued future for IDS. Janet Perna, General Manager of Data Management Solutions for the IBM Software Group, says "We'll continue to support the Informix database product line for as long as need be. Our strategy is not to migrate existing applications [to DB2], but as companies start building the next generation of applications, we think they'll want to build them on the next-generation database - DB2."

This credo has reverberated in the sales field, with many companies reporting that in meetings with IBM account managers concerning new installations, or database upgrades to house new applications, IDS simply is not mentioned: instead, the focus is entirely on DB2.

This was borne out at the IBM Data Management Conference held in Anaheim, California, in September 2002, where Gary Schneider, IBM marketing executive responsible for Channel Partners, was at pains to distinguish between marketing effort and advertising effort for Informix. "You should not expect to see any further *advertising* for Informix", he said.

Between September and December 2002, IBM is holding a number of technical, or "Infobahn" seminars around the world, designed to reassure the IDS user base. Although open to all users, these seminars tend to concentrate on the newer product versions, and usually attract the larger clients already more likely to be on those versions. The message at the high end is clear: IDS will exist as a separate product set for the foreseeable future, and its best features will be ported into a merged database offering. Equally clear, however, is that this merged product will be DB2.

Implicit in the objective of having DB2 as the ultimate destination for all users is that IBM will also try to persuade end users, and application vendors, to move towards IBM's flagship application development environment, WebSphere, and to phase out Informix's own 4GL development language, at least as an active tool for new developments.

Alternatives available to application developers are to deploy an Open application development environment such as that provided by Four J's Development Tools, or in use of a 4GL compiler like Querix Hydra 4GL Compiler for Informix RDBMS, which can be used for (relatively) painless migration of application code from IDS to Oracle. (At the IBM Data Management Conference, Querix announced that the Hydra compiler would soon contain support for DB2 as well).

IBM has a deliberate marketing strategy for its database products to proclaim that, as a pure database vendor not offering applications of its own, it is the natural choice for third party application developers. For instance, the SAP Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) product can run on either an Oracle or a DB2 database server. IBM questions why SAP should prefer Oracle Corporation as a strategic partner when the latter also offers a competing application, Oracle Financials. IBM's argument is that it would be far better to champion the cause of DB2, because IBM has no covetous eyes cast in the direction of the application business as well.

There is evidence, however, that Informix, already under pressure before the IBM takeover, is still being squeezed out through a lack of championing by its new owner. For instance, the PeopleSoft ERP solution's new CRM module will not be supported on IDS, and a number of clients are reporting that Elite, suppliers of management software widely used by Law Firms in the USA and UK, are encouraging their users to choose SQL Server over IDS.

So long as the move from IDS to DB2 is perceived by end users as a "migration", why should those end users not consider other Database Management Systems (DBMS), if they believe that they will have to absorb the pain and costs of migration anyway? Certainly, competitors like Oracle and Microsoft have and will seek to exploit any lack of clarity in IBM's message.

The biggest challenge for IBM remains to make the move to the consolidated DB2/IDS engine very much simpler than the alternatives, and to convince users of this.

The Small Users

As mentioned above, there is a large number of sites running relatively small applications underpinned by Informix OnLine (or even Informix SE) that may be completely unaware of the takeover. This will present quite a challenge for IBM, as these sites generally provide a steady, albeit small, income stream that requires little or no maintenance. There are some indications that IBM is trying to persuade some of these sites to migrate to IDS v7 by re-pricing the "Workgroup" product, which runs on a single or dual-CPU server, but the picture is very unclear.

Shortly before the takeover by IBM, perhaps recognising that these customers had been poorly treated by Informix's ill-judged strategies of the mid-1990s, Informix had moved to re-brand its older, pre IDS products such as Standard Engine and OnLine as "Informix Classics". Enrique Macaraeg, the project manager for the Informix Classic range, is upbeat about the outlook for the product set: "As to the future of IBM Informix OnLine, it is still sailing strong. As stated in the Informix White paper, OnLine 5.20 is on schedule and will be delivered later this year. At [the Informix User Conference scheduled for September 2002], you will be hearing news about our developments plans in the area of improved performance with IBM Informix 7.x Tools and improved disk drive support".

Mr Macaraeg goes on to hint that IBM will be reviewing the charging schedule for Informix Classic products, although no details are available yet. He may however be facing an uphill struggle, as a number of third party application developers begin to produce roadmaps that eliminate Informix as their database of choice in favour of databases such as Microsoft SQL Server, whose future is assured and well-understood.

According to Mr Schneider, much of IBM's marketing effort for Informix will concentrated around dialogue with Channel Partners - that is, software companies who have developed products that can run on any one of a number of database systems. However, champions of Informix are quick to point out that, in a growing number of cases, the battle has already been already lost.

Futures and Options

What should an IDS customer do? IDS sites using IDS v7 or v9 should decide to what extent they believe IBM's message that the product sets will be merged, and that it will ultimately provide a gradual, seamless transition to DB2. Those planning a major new application in the near future should weigh up their options: IBM will probably try to persuade them to migrate to DB2, and at this stage the alternatives should be considered, because a migration from IDS to DB2 is likely to be no less painful than to, say, Oracle. For other sites, there seems no major imperative to switch now: wait-and-see will be the best policy.

IBM is very keen for IDS v7 users to migrate to v9, and has therefore indicated an end of life for the IDS v7 product set. The migration from v7 to v9 is not, in Ardenta's experience, a difficult one and provided that the licensing costs are comparable, v7 sites should have no fear of doing this.

The picture is much less clear for Informix OnLine sites, many of whose options will be dictated by the policies of their application vendors. IBM has much work to do to persuade these application partners, and their clients, that their futures lie with Informix databases, or that DB2 on UNIX or NT platforms is even a viable option at its current stage of development.

About the Author

Neil Truby has a BSc (Hons) in Theoretical Physics from the University of Exeter, and 25 years' experience as an information technology consultant working in the United Kingdom and overseas. He is an experienced Oracle, Informix and Sybase DBA as well as a programmer and UNIX expert.

Neil has worked for a number of organisations including Chase Manhattan Bank, Aon Insurance Group, City of London, Grand Metropolitan, International Stock Exchange and Channel 7 TV in Australia. Neil has also implemented a high-availability and backup and recovery solution for the Crest online trading system operated by the Chase Manhattan Bank, using storage area network (SAN) and high-speed backup and infrastructure techniques.

About ArdentA

Ardenta is an independent IT consultancy specialising in managed technical services, remote technical support and project management to organisations running database management systems on a range of computing platforms.

Based in Sunbury on Thames, the company's mission is to help enterprises to minimise their total cost of ownership by facilitating optimal use of their technologies.

Glossary

AS/400

IBM's successor to the System/36 and System/38. It is a midrange computer with its own operating system, OS/400. The operating system includes its own relational database.

Database Management System (DBMS)

A collection of programs that enable multiple users within a system to store, modify, and extract information from a database. The system maintains the integrity of the data (its availability and organisation) and permits only those with access privileges to use it.

DB2

An IBM relational database management system that is available as a licensed program on several operating systems. Programmers and users of DB2 can create, access, modify, and delete data in relational tables using a variety of interfaces.

Four J's Development Tools

A supplier of Rapid Application Development (RAD) tools for traditional and e-commerce business applications.

Fourth-Generation Language (4GL)

The fourth major step or generation in the evolution of programming languages. A 4GL is designed to be closer to natural language than a 3GL language. Languages for accessing databases are often described as 4GLs.

Informix Dynamic Server (IDS)

Informix Dynamic Server is a multithreaded relational database server that manages data that is stored in rows and columns. It employs a single processor or symmetric multiprocessor (SMP) systems and dynamic scalable architecture (DSA) to deliver database scalability, manageability and performance.

Informix SE

Zero-administration, embeddable, multiuser DBMS.

Informix OnLine 5

Easy OLTP for small to mid-size businesses.

Online Transaction Processing (OLTP)

A mode of processing that is characterised by short transactions recording business events and that normally requires high availability and consistent, short response times.

Querix

A software tool author, specialising in 4GL compilers and database application solutions for Informix and Oracle databases.

Relational Database Management System (RDBMS)

A type of database management system that stores data in the form of related tables. They are powerful in that they impose few assumptions about how data is related or how it will be extracted from relational databases.

UNIX operating system

An operating system developed by Bell Laboratories that features multiprogramming in a multiuser environment. UNIX was originally developed for use on minicomputers but has been adapted for mainframes and microcomputers. The AIX operating system is IBM's implementation of the UNIX operating system.

WebSphere

Pertaining to a family of IBM software products that provide a development and deployment environment for basic web publishing and for transaction-intensive, enterprise-scale e-business applications.

Informix Extended Parallel Server (XPS)

Enterprise data warehousing.



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AS/400

DB2

Informix

Red Brick

WebSphere

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