



**Maintenance Perspectives**  
Ways to get more from your hardware agreements

## The Maintenance Judo Chop

Scalability issues with maintenance contracts can wreck IT plans for smooth capacity growth

July 19, 2011

### Keep an eye out for typos.

Details are at the bottom of this newsletter's content.

## Smarter Scaling

Hardware purchases are prompted primarily by growth. A need for greater storage capacity, for instance, will eventually drive the purchase of more storage hardware whether the datacenter is virtualized or not. A large proportion of IT management's job is in keeping growth under control, and keeping the infrastructure scalable so that increased needs are not themselves a source of increased management troubles.

Poorly-designed hardware maintenance agreements get in the way of the growth of your data center by restricting the types and forms of coverage, and by making change orders a significant hassle. These conditions will vary widely by product type (server, storage, network, OS) and by OEM vendor, but certain red flags are fairly consistent across the board.

First, OEM and third-party maintenance solutions can be flexible and scalable, but OEMs tend more towards one-size-fits-all maintenance agreements due to the economic advantages across huge customer bases. These can be a real advantage if you happen to be exactly the size that one-size-fits-all targets; but when your data center has multiple vendor products that have to work together, or when you have a significant amount legacy equipment, there may be trouble.

## Complexity is a matter of perspective

The goal for most shops is to ensure that production machines are all covered under an appropriately high Service Level Agreement (24x7x365 coverage with a technician onsite in 4 hours or less, for instance). Development machines or non-mission-critical systems may be covered under a lower level agreement, a joint self-service agreement with the third party or OEM as a parts broker only, or left to Time and Materials coverage. Simple enough with a few machines at a single site, but how well does that scale out?

On the other hand, a one-size-fits-all agreement may be easier to manage

on paper because, after all, one-size-fits-all; one price is paid for one level of service on all systems. In reality that's going to cost a lot of money to deliver more coverage than is needed if you have a lot of redundancy or low-critical systems in the data center.

Ideally your current coverage is neither too low (leaving critical hardware at a too-low service level) nor too high (leaving you paying extra for coverage you don't need). More to the point, you can then analyze what affect growth will have on the coverage levels. If you expand storage by 20%, what happens to your coverage needs? If you retain the legacy models and designate them to lower-level tasks, what coverage is realistic and appropriate for them now?

## **Retention issues and maintenance**

Particular pitfalls can arise when growth is not merely in new systems, but in postwarranty/legacy systems as well. This is a common side effect of growth when retention of old systems occurs due to HIPAA compliance or simply to get the most out of an investment, but it can cause major snarls if your maintenance provider won't support postwarranty machines to a service level that meets your needs--most OEM providers offer only time and materials or no support at all on postwarranty hardware in general.

## **Specific factors for specific OEMS**

A similar situation can arise when dealing with a one-size-fits-all maintenance contract that also happens to be all-or-nothing. Oracle Sun in particular is extremely strict about delivering exclusive support solutions that may or may not have an effect depending on how vendor-neutral or legacy-friendly your particular data center locations are. Other OEMs may be less hypersensitive to mixed hardware or mixed service providers, but the larger consideration in the interest of scalability is to determine how growth changes your relationship to hardware vendors. A provider who's great for the small-end stuff you used to use may not have the best midrange or high end product, and in the same way a high-priced maintenance agreement for a few systems may be more palatable than the same high-priced agreement billed out across a larger number of systems.

For that matter, even relatively low-cost services like Cisco Smartnet can be prohibitively expensive when being purchased for dozens or hundreds of individual items. Cisco doesn't actually require an all-or-nothing Smartnet maintenance arrangement but they have no incentive to publicize that fact. Network hardware support, for that matter, is an entirely different animal from server and storage support, because the OEMs themselves don't offer true SLA support where a problem is diagnosed during service coverage hours, and faulty components are replaced by a technician who comes onsite; rather the OEM product support consists of self-diagnosis, and possibly a discussion regarding how long it takes to get a replacement part

sent out, and coverage only determines who pays for the part. For SLA coverage levels as well as useful extensions like monitoring or configuration saves, you need to involve third party providers. Here again, there could be scalability bottlenecks when you need to grow with too much or too little support coverage of networking hardware.

Overall it's a worthy exercise to consider maintenance as a separate aspect that needs to be fine-tuned and optimized for the datacenter just like any other service. Otherwise you deal with inefficiencies or coverage gaps at the low end and budget-bleeding expenses at the high end. The difference is, it's not a service running on the hardware; rather, it's a service that ensures your hardware keeps running.

### Free Maintenance Consultation

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