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Product review: Sturdy UnixWare aims to Oust NT, NetWare

Tom Yager (Computerworld) | **13 April, 1999 12:01**

Consolidation fever has hit machine rooms from coast to coast. We're all chasing the promise of simplified management, centrally located storage, and pooled resources. Yet where OSes are concerned, there is no perfect choice for the emerging PC superserver.

Windows NT works best in the old model, running on several smaller servers. NetWare does great file/print and directory services, but it does not do enough to have a massive server all to itself. Linux and FreeBSD are loaded with services, but they are a challenge to manage and still shy on enterprise-class scalability. But with Release 7.1 of UnixWare, SCO is trying to turn its respectable OS into a single-server powerhouse.

UnixWare 7 is the sturdiest and most feature-rich Unix ever ported to Intel processors. Based on Unix System V, Release 5, which SCO bought from Novell (which bought it from AT&T), UnixWare 7 brings genuine Unix to PC servers. In the recently released UnixWare 7.1, SCO has improved the bundled contents and offers some exciting new technology for PC Unix users.

SCO delivers UnixWare 7.1 in six bundles, from the workstation-tuned Base Edition to the high-availability Data Center Edition. I reviewed the mainstream bundle, dubbed Business Edition. It is clearly built to take the place of an NT or NetWare server, promising better scalability and a wider range of services.

The software included in the Business Edition hits its target dead on. In addition to the core OS, X Windows graphics, and Common Desktop Environment (CDE) graphical shell, UnixWare 7.1 includes Computer Associates' ARCserveIT backup software, SCO's VisionFS cross-platform network file/print system, Netscape's FastTrack Web server, IBM's Network Station Manager for managing network computers, and Sun's Java Software Development Kit.

But most notable among Version 7.1's new features is Webtop, unique to UnixWare. Webtop lets any system equipped with a Java-capable browser run any software installed on the UnixWare server, including text and graphical Unix programs, Linux applications, 3270 terminal emulation sessions to hosts, DOS and Windows 95 software, and custom Web-based solutions.

Webtop's administrative tool creates a unique set of desktop icons for each user. Each Webtop icon effortlessly connects the user with an approved application that may exist on any server and in any form. You may need to install software (such as SCO's Merge for the DOS/Windows 95 support) to get all application types running, but that costs nothing compared with the price of equipping a PC to locally run these programs.

Webtop, in both design and execution, is breathtaking. Watching a complete X Windows CDE session appear in a PC's browser window -- with surprisingly good performance -- will change the way you think about distributed applications. What brings unique value to Webtop is SCO's supplied set of Webtop content pages. For example, a troubleshooting guide runs a UnixWare administrative tool in the top half of the screen, while HTML text below walks a user through a step-by-step resolution process. Users are treated to standard documentation and guidance that makes Webtop less intimidating than any version of Windows.

Webtop relies on the performance and stability of each browser's Java virtual machine. Webtop ran far better under Netscape Navigator than Internet Explorer, and IE 5 brought Webtop to its knees.

UnixWare 7.1 ships on one media set that supports original installations and upgrades from 7.0. Beware: The original installation is no breeze. From the three-floppy boot to the finish, plan on two hours. The installer requires excessive interaction, even if you instruct it to load all software your licence permits. I prefer installations that ask questions up front, then clam up until it's time to change media.

Unfortunately, SCO does not work under a Microsoft-like honour licence. Licence certificates contain codes that unlock UnixWare for a particular feature set and a predetermined number of users and CPUs. The included user licences are fairly anemic: five users for some bundles, and only one user for others. SCO's licence counts non-anonymous FTP transfers as active user sessions for which a licence must be purchased. The licensing language is vague and confusing, and SCO generally asks you to pay for every simultaneous user who makes contact with a UnixWare server.

I tested the Business Edition of UnixWare 7.1 on a PC server with a Tyan dual-processor motherboard. Although it was configured with two 400MHz CPUs, the licence restricted operation to one processor. Because dual-processor servers are now the norm, SCO should consider raising this bundle's standard licence to accommodate them.

The Business Edition is targeted at small to mid-size businesses, trimming the cost by cutting back some features. Still, impressive enterprise-class attributes remain.

Only one CPU is enabled out of the box, starting with a five-user licence. You're limited to 4GB of the possible 64GB of RAM that UnixWare will support. If you can afford more than two processors, UnixWare 7.1 purports to handle as many as 32 CPUs, with tuned performance for 16. The OS architecture manages as many as eight network interface cards and 1024 hard drives. The licence restricts only CPUs, users, and memory.

For widespread sharing of applications, you must upgrade to a full Tarantella licence. The taste you get from Webtop, though, makes this option quite appealing. Add to that UnixWare's well-organized, comprehensive, and searchable online HTML help, graphical administration tools, and a mature, battle-hardened kernel, and UnixWare 7.1 compares very favorably to its competitors. I have hoped to find a PC Unix OS as polished and savvy as Windows NT. UnixWare 7.1 is it.

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The bottom line: excellent

UnixWare 7.1, Business Edition

A genuine Unix OS for PC servers, this NOS consolidates file/print, Internet, and distributed application services on a single machine, reducing equipment costs and easing administration.

Pros: Well-equipped bundle; fantastic online documentation; Webtop distributed application architecture.

Cons: Tedious installation; confusing licensing terms; single CPU standard.www.sco.comPrice: Business Edition: $US1399.

Platform: Intel processor PCs.

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