Execs Look to Dim Data Center Lights

News Story by Patrick Thibodeau

MARCH 13, 2006 (COMPUTERWORLD) — PALM DESERT, Calif. — Hewlett-Packard CIO Randall Mott's belief that "lights-out" data centers are possible was generally accepted by other IT managers at the Premier 100 conference, even if they disagreed over whether the necessary tools are far enough along to turn the lights out completely or just dim them.

As part of a plan to reduce the number of the company's data centers from about 85 worldwide to just six, Mott is setting out to prove that HP can develop a data center that can be operated entirely remotely. The plan, which Mott detailed at last week's conference, also includes consolidating more than 700 data marts into an enterprise data warehouse.

Mott said the consolidation moves are aimed at helping HP reduce its IT spending level from about 4% of annual revenue to 1.5% by the end of the company's 2008 or 2009 fiscal year.

A staffless data center is "absolutely conceivable," thanks to the availability of remote management tools, said Bob Jellison, vice president of information services at Papyrus Franchise Corp., a retailer in Fairfield, Calif.

But in Jellison's view, the long-term issue won't be so much lights-out operations but whether IT managers want to keep running their own data centers or hand them off to outsourcing vendors. "Do you really need to be running all those servers?" he asked.

Among those waiting to be convinced that a true lights-out data center is feasible is David Hackbarth, acting chief for technology and information at the U.S. Census Bureau's national processing center in Jeffersonville, Ind.

Hackbarth is involved in a project to consolidate and standardize his IT environment on Linux and Windows systems, primarily blade servers. Through virtualization, the processing center has already reduced the number of physical servers it runs from more than 160 to about 60, he said.

But even with the increased standardization, Hackbarth said he thinks that staffing will be needed in the Census Bureau's data center to guard against technical problems.

That view is shared by Oliver Schmid, manager of information systems at Duluth, Ga.-based Alfred Karcher Inc., a subsidiary of a Winnenden, Germany-based cleaning equipment maker.

"I don't believe in lights-out data centers. I believe in dim lights," Schmid said. IT facilities will still need operations workers with versatile talents -- "people who know a little bit of everything," he said.

Other conference attendees said the viability of lights-out data centers is dependent on improvements in management software, such as predictive tools that can give users
advance warnings of imminent system failures.