

BMC enhances IMS Fast Path

Heard that mainframe database technology was stagnant? Think again!

Various competitors of the mainframe continue their campaigns to convince customers that the mainframe and mainframe databases are obsolete and must be replaced. BMC's announcement of its just released IMS Fast Path product refutes these claims in a way that effectively undermines and disarms any such arguments.



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It is clear that software and hardware differ in their useful lifetimes. We all know that after only a few years, some hardware can wear out or become so obsolete by technological and technical advances that it makes a persuasive case for replacement.

Software, on the other hand, has the potential to last indefinitely. The natural question is: why doesn't it do so? The usual answer is that the designers of the software did not foresee, and make allowance for, any of a variety of changes that would obsolete the software. For example, COBOL programs written in the middle of the 20th century used only two digits for the year. Thus, the turn of the century could cause these programs to give incorrect results.

However, using code that has been in production and extensively used for an extended period has some great benefits. Such code will have been 'through the wringer' which is very effective in discovering and correcting difficult or obscure bugs.

The database system IMS provides a very good example. After 40 years of intensive use in production environments, thoroughly tested and proven, the code continues to perform effectively in numerous and varied applications.

The IMS feature, Fast Path, has been in production for 'just' 30 years. When first designed, the architects of these products assumed it would be reasonable and possible for customers to take a system down for an extended period for routine maintenance or other necessary tasks.

For example, they assumed a bank's data center operations would shut down for a weekend to perform data base rebuilds and other maintenance. They did not foresee the arrival of ATMs that need near continuous systems availability. As a result, many Fast Path customers today must live with systems that require lengthy scheduled downtime or outage when the database needs updating.

What did BMC do?

BMC has announced Fast Path Online Restructure/EP to eliminate the problem of requiring long outages for IMS Fast Path database updates. It drastically reduces the time needed to restructure a Fast Path database. Whereas before a typical restructure outage or downtime might consume many hours, with BMC's new product that time is reduced to only a few minutes.

Table 1 below, shows the dramatic reduction that has been achieved along with additional features.

	Offline time required Database restructure	Automatic JCL Generation	Provides Structured Flow for database update
Fast Path	6 hours	No	No
BMC's Fast Path Online Restructure/EP	15 minutes	Yes	Yes

Figure 1- A comparison of Fast Path and BMC's Fast Path Online Restructure/EP performance

The data in the table represents the experience of a Beta Test customer of Fast Path Online Restructure/EP.

BMC plans to reduce the outage time even further. Other benefits to this product include the ability to generate automatically the JCL for the update. There is also the ability for the customer to simulate the results of the structure changes and their affect on the database. This permits any errors that may result from the changes to be caught before they are made in the production database.

Next steps

Obviously, responsible IT folks need to evaluate carefully anything that touches the production databases. When the cost of operations is under intense scrutiny and the importance of economic and efficient operation is so critical, anything that speeds and automates operations deserves a closer examination. We believe that Fast Path customers would be well served if they began this process with a close examination of this BMC product. We suspect that in many cases the potential benefits will prove to be far too large to ignore.

Ptak/Noel Perspective

There are several important messages that result from the release of this product. Understand that many companies are trying to paint the mainframe technology as outmoded and obsolete. These companies have no hesitation in approaching senior management at companies using the mainframe and presenting their message that mainframe technology should be replaced by more 'modern' technology. They will point out that IMS and DL1 are old, outworn and must be replaced. Of course, they minimize costs of such replacement. In addition, they tell management that IMS is dead in the water. They say that these databases are being neglected by most vendors and, as a result, have fallen behind the technology curve. They will try to convince management that they must move off their traditional database on to a new one.

Such arguments are simply not true. The arguments and excuses do not deal with reality. The real facts about the mainframe in general is that BMC, along with the other three major vendors and a significant number of others continue to invest in developing and improving products for the mainframe environment. The number of mainframe MIPS sold and used continues to grow at very high rates. Both the hardware and the software continue to be highly competitive and cost effective when compared to other platforms.

When it comes to migrating or moving to a new database platform, the facts are as follows:

- There are real risks in replacing any database. It is quite possible that the replacement database will not deliver the level of performance that the original database supplied. This means that the cost of migration will be increased because there will need to be careful study and benchmarking of the performance of the new database.
- Further, new transactions will need to be created for the new database. Given the pressure on IT headcount, it is unlikely that existing staff will be available to create transactions. This means that external consultants will be needed to perform this part of the project. The learning curve for such consultants and their subsequent work will cause large increases in any project budget.
- Recognize that benefits accrue from the length of time the IMS database and customer transactions have been in production. Most likely any bugs that could affect production have been wrung out of the code. New code will mean that process starts all over again. The costs incurred during this activity are rarely factored into migration costs.
- Finally, any IMS replacement will require extensive parallel operations. These can be very costly. Again, companies seeking to sell database replacements do not typically mention such costs.

The fact that BMC is willing to make an investment in IMS is an important statement about the future of IMS in the marketplace. BMC shows concern for its customers, while at the same time, making a statement about their commitment to and belief that IMS has a solid future in the data center. IMS customers should assure that their management is aware of these developments.

The Final Word

BMC's announcement is important for several reasons. First, and most importantly, it significantly improves existing functionality, while resolving what has been a major problem for many Fast Path users. It demonstrates the close contact BMC maintains with the mainframe base and displays their commitment to address the most pressing operational problems.

Second, it provides conclusive proof that BMC continues to invest in mainframe products and especially mainframe database technology. BMC remains committed to helping customers get maximum return on their existing investment in mainframe database technologies.

Finally, BMC making these investments should reassure many customers who might have wondered whether, or not, they should continue with Fast Path. Several vendors continue to encourage and persuade Fast Path customers to convert to a 'more modern' relational database. It is typical of these vendors to ignore or attempt to minimize the problems surrounding such a conversion. We're not saying the conversion is never the right thing to do. Situations exist when it makes economic sense to migrate from IMS. Just be sure to understand the difficulty and expense of such migrations. Products such as Fast Path Online Restructure/EP do much to reduce the attractiveness and the need for such moves.

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Previously Moran held positions as senior vice president and the research operations manager for Ideas International after the acquisition of D.H. Brown Associates, Inc. (DBHA). While at DBHA, Moran managed the analyst team and led the company’s consulting business first as Research Director and then as Senior Vice President.

Before joining DHBA, Bill was a senior manager at Coopers and Lybrand leading the team who designed and developed the firm’s tax and audit software. Before joining Coopers and Lybrand, Bill held numerous management and technical management positions at IBM. He was responsible for IBM’s worldwide large systems support for the IBM World Trade Corporation. He also managed international teams delivering educational content (including several IBM-published RedBooks), providing customer support, and participating in benchmark testing for IBM’s mainframe systems.