

CHRONIQUE

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The nugget in the dust

Nothing seems further from the Web than a large system. "Mainframers" often refer to themselves as dinosaurs or crocodiles - perhaps to let us know what thick skin they have. In many large companies, a lot of data and applications can still be found on large systems. How have mainframes managed to survive? For three reasons. Firstly, like all of the IT sector, large systems obey Moore's law, in other words, they have become increasingly reliable and their prices have dropped as they support the growth of companies. Secondly, there is the concept of mainframes themselves: their usefulness is being rediscovered in terms of virtualisation and organisation of security. And finally there is the issue of their content: as improvements have been made, year after year, the value of large systems has been increasingly strengthened.

At the same time, the Web is being revolutionised. For companies to survive, simply having an Internet identity is no longer enough. Exchanges with suppliers, customers, employees and contractors must be conducted through Web applications. These applications are therefore constantly present and being constantly used. This means that each exchange can fail at any moment. In addition, the authorisation given to system users, both virtual and real, must be managed by professionals. It is amusing to note how this is very like the style of mainframes, which were dominant in the past, where each one formed its own "world", in which applications had to be robust and economical, and where a large number of users was normal, each of them being able to update part of the system in a controlled manner.

"Combining large systems with Web technologies provides opportunities for easy gains"

Because of this, we now have the opportunity of creating synergies between large systems and the Web: firstly, the applications of the former can be transcribed into Internet applications at little cost. Secondly, the process of companies opening up to the world can be accelerated by reusing large-system applications. A few years ago, the difficulties posed by transposition were a major deterrent and sometimes led to large systems being abandoned. Suppliers have now managed to solve these problems. And to such an extent that it is often impossible to say whether an application has been adapted or rewritten.

As for the complexity of applications, we are finding that this is less due to their age than to the original constraints of large systems: the permanence of the service provided, resistance to incidents, economy of resources and security management. This necessary complexity is capable of solving problems that are still an issue today and the solutions provided are, by definition, compatible with the rest of the information system.

We are just starting to see the opportunities there are for easy gains to be made by combining large systems with Web technologies. We need to recognise the gold nugget hidden within the dusty 3270 application that is still in production. And understand how to improve it through Web techniques, without losing performance and instead making operational gains. It is often said that fashions are cyclical. Could it be that we are about to see a new vogue for large systems as Web facilitators? **01DSI**