

Out of the box and into production

BY BILL LABERIS

Photographs by Emily Nathan

F5's partnership with Microsoft is in full bloom at the Microsoft Technology Centers.



Microsoft's Alex Jauch (right) and F5's Calvin Rowland at the Mountain View, Calif. MTG (Microsoft Technology Center), one of several MTGs worldwide where customers can test pending applications in a large enterprise-class environment.

++++show and tell+++++

Having grown nearly tenfold to some \$20 billion in annual sales, a home building and property development company found that a business-critical application it had developed had smacked into performance and scalability problems. Running on Hewlett-Packard servers and the Microsoft software platform with a .NET middle tier and SQL Server back end, the application was gasping for air. The company began wondering whether the Microsoft platform could scale to meet its new, large enterprise-class needs and requirements.

Company executives got a definitive answer at the Microsoft Technology Center (MTC) in Mountain View, Calif. And before they deployed a single line of code in their own environment, they already knew that the revamped solution presented to them would work. The reason is that Microsoft, along with F5, a key networking technology partner in MTCs around the world, was able to simulate a very-large-scale application deployment that had all the scalability the customer needed, for today and for the foreseeable future.

"This customer had written a suboptimal application and was doing a lot of session-state management in the application," recalls Alex Jauch, who manages the Microsoft-F5 relationship at the Mountain View MTC. "A traditional IP switcher just wasn't going to do it for them. But using F5's BIG-IP intelligent switch, which is session-state-aware, we solved a significant problem for the builder while showing just how readily the



Microsoft platform can scale to meet the needs of a very large enterprise.”

Try before you buy

For the homebuilder and for scores of other large organizations, the MTC is able to mimic the kind of heterogeneous environment common in most companies. Then, with key partners like F5, Microsoft helps build and run a simulation of the application to be deployed. Customers get to create and then try out the real thing before launching new or reworked applications into their own environments.

Moreover, by simulating application development and deployment at an MTC, customers can literally knock months off deployment cycles. This translates into immediate cost savings. Equally important, this accelerated application development gives the business faster time-to-market with its applications and thus the potential for true competitive advantage.

“The MTC helps customers accelerate development time and mitigate the risk of new deployments,” notes Jen Lehman, senior marketing manager for the MTCs. “We have all the resources right on site and ready for them. There’s no waiting for the right consultant or right partner to show up—they’re here already.”

The partnership between F5 and the MTCs is about two years old now, although the technology relationship between the two companies goes back five years. For Microsoft, having F5 as a partner in the MTC “was a classic no-brainer,” says Jauch. Microsoft had deployed F5 in its demanding production environment. That experience led Microsoft to believe the two companies could partner to offer enterprise customers the kind of application performance and scalability that



Simulating application development and deployment at an MTC saves time and money—not to mention speeding time-to-market.

today’s business environment demands.

“Scalability is as vital to customers coming to the MTCs as application performance, because when they are considering a new application, they want to make sure they have the ability to grow easily, and securely,” notes Jauch. “Security and scale have been two areas our competitors have tried to use against us. That’s fine with us, because with F5, we jointly have the answer. And with the MTCs, we can prove it.”

MTCs AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

Microsoft Technology Centers are found in the following locations in North America, in addition to eight international locations in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia:

- Austin
- Boston
- Chicago
- Reston, VA
- Silicon Valley (Mountain View, CA)

If you would like to visit an MTC or know more about what the MTC can do to help your business and development efforts, contact your local F5 representative.

Making applications hum

Calvin Rowland, director of business development and F5’s main liaison with Microsoft, says F5’s product portfolio is highly complementary with that of Microsoft, producing tangible dividends for customers. For one thing, F5 essentially taps into Microsoft’s enormous customer base to get an intimate sense of what customers want and need, both immediately and tomorrow. With this knowledge, F5 continues to add new features and functions to solutions like BIG-IP and the FirePass SSL VPN remote access solution as demanded by this vast user base, often ahead of the actual need.

“You don’t buy a farm because you own a tractor, and you don’t buy applications because you have a network,” quips Rowland. “In the MTCs, we provide the application performance expertise. We’re there to help make sure the application will perform well over the network, and securely too.”

When partners such as F5 recognize a specific customer need, they can invite that customer to a one-day Strategy Briefing Session at the MTC. These are highly customized sessions and demonstrations designed to educate the customer about a potential solu-

tion and to look at different possibilities for developing it.

From there, the customer can also take part in a two- or three-day Architecture Design Session involving three or more of the customer’s architects. This session involves sharing design best practices, and time is spent at white boards mapping out specifically how the solution should be built to meet the customer’s needs.

Real solutions, not promises

Finally, customers can elect to participate in a Proof of Concept engagement, held in a development suite at the MTC and involving a team of five or more of the customer’s developers sitting side-by-side with technical architects from Microsoft and partners like F5. This engagement lasts two to three weeks. The end result is a prototype of a portion of the application that has been battle-tested in the MTC.

“F5 enables us to build the kinds of very large and highly scalable enterprise-class environments that we just couldn’t manage with a Microsoft-only solution,” says Jauch. “We can build very large and scalable web farms right here, but not without the kind of IP management we get from F5. And with F5’s FirePass, we can also provide a very rich, very secure remote access scenario in an open-systems environment that very closely resembles a typical enterprise.”

Looking ahead, F5’s Rowland says plans are being made to bring the technology solutions of F5’s recently acquired Swan Labs to the MTCs. Swan’s WANJet devices help speed application traffic over WAN connections with a variety of technologies. And its WebAccelerator is an advanced application delivery solution that provides superior web application performance for mobile workers. ✨