Roger Jennings

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ADOPTING BACKOFFICE IN

1995—COUNT ON IT.

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Get Ready for BackOffice

Microsoft executive vice president of sales and support Steve Ballmer, who's spearheading the company's BackOffice marketing program, hopes to increase client/server sales from 10 percent of Microsoft's current income to 25 percent five years from now. Ballmer's work is cut out for him if he is to make 1995 the "Year of BackOffice." Microsoft is promoting BackOffice with a vengeance, and the product is certain to increase the firm's share of the burgeoning downsizing market. Here are a few examples of the company's efforts:

Aggressive Pricing. Microsoft's new BackOffice server suite offers Visual Basic developers a major new income opportunity: integrating back-end components of client/server systems with OLE Automation. Riding on the success of its Office front-end package, Microsoft's offering deep discounts on a combination of Windows NT 3.5 Server, SQL Server 4.21a, Microsoft Mail 3.2 Server, SNA Server 2.1, and Systems Management Server 1.0. The bundle has a one-off "estimated retail price" of $2199. Client licenses are $309 per seat, with discounts for big buyers.

Component Ducks are Lining Up. You won't see OLE Automation capabilities in version 1.0 of BackOffice, because the final pieces aren't yet in place. And SQL 95, to replace SQL Server 4.21a in mid-1995, includes OLE/SQL to expose database administrative objects. Exchange Server, Microsoft's client/server challenge to Lotus's shared-file Notes groupware product, will offer OLE/Exchange to open the message store and administrative functions to Visual Basic OLE client applications. OLE/Messaging and OLE/Schedule+, MAPI 1.0 applications planned to accompany Exchange Server's release, will expose OLE objects for messaging and scheduling. Microsoft also promises that a future Systems Management Server SDK will include OLE Objects for networked PC administration. Once the new BackOffice components are in place, Visual Basic will be the "glue tool" for orchestrating BackOffice components.

The Propaganda Juggernaut Goes Full Speed Ahead. The Microsoft TV studios produce hour-long "Distributed Computing" shows extolling the virtues of Windows NT 3.5 Server and other components of BackOffice. The server series alternates with "Office Solutions" programs, which describe front-end applications created with Microsoft Office components. If you have a satellite dish, watch the programs on Galaxy 7's transponder 16 the first and third Tuesdays of the month at 8:00 a.m. PST. You can purchase VHS tapes from MobilTape at 800-369-5718. The Microsoft TV Forum on CompuServe (GO MSTV) includes program listings and transcripts for each broadcast. Also, you can bet that Steve Ballmer will get for BackOffice a chunk of Microsoft's $100 million advertising budget to promote its image and products in 1995.

Solid Educational Resources are Available, Too. Microsoft released its "Solutions Framework" CD-ROM courseware last December. The Framework outlines strategies developed by Microsoft Consulting Services for migrating database applications to the client/server environment. The $1495 Solutions Framework course is targeted at decision makers, but Access and Visual Basic developers who are heavily into client/server development can benefit from the methodology described in the course (call 206-703-4673 for more details). Your clients will be asking serious questions about adopting BackOffice in 1995—count on it.

The downside to the hype regarding BackOffice and its implementation of OLE Automation is that OLE still isn't ready for distributed computing prime time. Currently, you're stuck with Lightweight Remote Procedure Calls (LRPCs) and OLE Automation client applications that must reside on the same PC as the OLE servers.

Microsoft gave developers a peek at "Distributed OLE" in January. Distributed OLE is based on the Distributed Computing Environment (DCE) RPC specification and will add new OLE APIs for object security. A full beta version of Distributed OLE, however, isn't expected until the alpha version of Cairo is available, probably late this year or early 1996.

Visual Basic developers won't get a free ride on Ballmer's BackOffice express. You'll need to devote time to climb the learning curve of the object collections exposed by Exchange Server, SQL 95, MAPI 1.0, and OLE/Schedule+. Tech*Ed '95 promises a variety of sessions devoted to BackOffice, and Tech Ed '96 is sure to have many more. So plan a trip to San Diego next March.

Finally, you'll have to set up BackOffice in *your* office to emulate your clients' installations, so add a Pentium server with 32 MB or 64 MB of RAM and a gigabyte or two of RAID 5 fixed disks to your investment. If you're game for this level of up-front expenditure, you'll be ready to reap the consulting harvest of "The Year of BackOffice" and prepare for "The Year of Distributed OLE." ∎