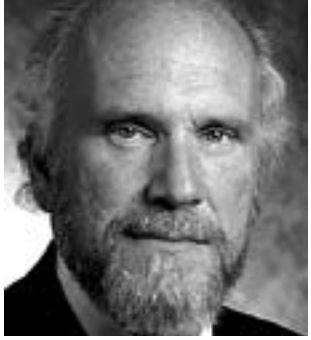
OPINION

Howard Rubin



IT'S FUTURE LIES IN SHARING RESOURCES

AN ASTOUNDING 85% of the world's computing capacity sits idle at any given moment yet consumes perhaps $250 billion in power, according to estimates in Alex Steffen's book, *Worldchanging*. So it's hard to imagine that capacity is growing at perhaps 28% per year for servers, 17% for mainframes and 45% for storage.

Now's the time for cross-organization sharing and scavenging of technology resources. It's a strategy called "technology commons."

The commons can be created by establishing technology "corridors" — like open space and green corridors in the environment — to enable large-scale sharing. These technology commons should be the basis of leveraging global technology capacity for the "basics" of tech-related services. That includes everything from simple consumables such as connectivity, desktop services and e-mail to processing power grids and data storage commons. In fact, it's easy to envision the Internet, Google's "cloud" and various offerings from Amazon, Yahoo and others as these new "commons."

In a 1968 article, biology professor Garrett Hardin set the stage for such thinking. "Picture a pasture open to all," he wrote. A herdsman grazing his animals on the land will have an incentive "to add another animal to his herd. And another; and another. But this is the conclusion reached by each and every rational herdsman sharing a commons. Therein is the tragedy. Each herdsman captures all the benefit from an extra animal, but the cost of overgrazing is borne by all."

Fast-forward 40 years and compare overgrazing to the use of "poison pill" service-level agreements.

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These SLAs benefit a single user or stakeholder but drive up the cost of the entire set of shared services. That cost must be "borne by all," but only a few get increased value.

Imagine, however, that you can build a true technology commons — a greenfield commons of the basic services within a company or across companies that provide core services at a basic level and aren't polluted by the needs of special interests. There would be no cost of "overgrazing"; rather, there would be only economies of scale.

The most fundamental of IT services could reside in this basic commons and could be extended to the more power-consuming services of computing (the cloud) and storage. This could be implemented at the application level, too. Software as a service is a good example of this new model.

There will always be special-interest groups with needs not served by the commons. For example, the financial services industry has specific e-mail needs that aren't met by services such as Gmail. But suppose Gmail-like services were the lowest-level commons, and next-level commons could add specialized features without polluting the cost structure of the basics. Using this model, it's clear that an organization with highly specialized needs would in fact be "uncommon," and its needs could be met only by having its own service.

Most organizations today would benefit from rethinking their shared-services strategy and moving to a true commons model with the removal of the overgrazed SLAs. That strategy would lead to enhanced economics of sharing and scale. At the same time, most organizations (and the planet) would benefit from collaboration that could result in those commons meeting more specialized but shared needs.

In our technology economy, "commons" sense is common sense. It meets the needs of organizations when an increasing source of waste is the underutilization of our growing technology resources. ■

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