IBM: Still Thinking Ahead

ThinkVantage products--from PCs to utilities to a translator--focus on innovation and practicality.

Tom Spring, PCWorld.com
Monday, November 04, 2002

NEW YORK--IBM has donned its thinking cap, revamping its PC line ranging from desktops to services under a new ThinkVantage Technologies division that focuses on helping customers quash the costs of managing and maintaining IBM PCs.

The new name and strategy, announced here Monday, come from IBM's successful ThinkPad notebook line. Starting in 2003, IBM will phase out its NetVista desktop PCs in exchange for a ThinkVantage line of systems and technologies that emphasize IBM services. The vision challenges the prevailing notion that inexpensive computers with faster processors, more memory, and larger hard drives equal a better computing experience, say executives who described their new plan.

"We are entering a new third phase of computing where technology matters," says Robert Moffat, IBM senior vice president and group executive president of IBM's Personal Systems and Integrated Supply Chain.

The first phase consisted of PC manufacturers racing to bring ever-more-powerful PCs to market ahead of competitors, Moffat says. The second phase was when PC vendors battled to build systems the most efficiently, for the lowest cost.

IBM plans to spearhead the third phase of computing, focusing not on speeds and feeds and manufacturing efficiency, but rather on technical innovation and reducing the headaches of managing systems.

Efficiency, Innovation

ThinkVantage is about cutting support costs, improving the efficiency of both technical staff and end users, boosting data protection, and better using existing technologies, says Rich Fennessy, vice president of marketing for IBM's personal computing division.

Moffat took swipes at competitors, saying PC manufacturers buy innovation from Microsoft and Intel, but that IBM actually delivers both. He was also critical of what he calls Dell's emphasis on making PC manufacturing more efficient, rather than on developing innovative technology.

"The PC industry is stuck in a rut," says Brian Connors, chief technology officer and vice president of business development and quality for the IBM personal computing division. "Faster computers and bigger hard drives aren't selling more computers, nor are they making PCs more efficient." Technology that helps users and technology managers save time and money will make PCs compelling, he says.

A Glance Ahead

IBM previewed a selection of current and future ThinkVantage projects. Existing IBM technology coming into the ThinkVantage tent include IBM's security subsystem; Rapid Restore PC recovery software; and Access Connections technology, which creates connectivity profiles for multiple scenarios and locations to facilitate wireless networking.
One upcoming ThinkVantage technology is an updated Rapid Restore PC called Lifeboat. You can load it from a CD or even a USB drive if your PC can't boot. Then the emergency recovery program provides Internet or network access through a Mozilla Web browser, and lets you search and recover data on your hard drive, sans Windows.

Also on display was ThinkVantage Distributed Wireless Security Auditor, developed for businesses guarding against security holes in their wireless networks. The program identifies wireless access points that may leave a company's network vulnerable to hackers, and will automatically shut the access point.

IBM also demonstrated BlueBoard, an upcoming ThinkVantage service that runs on a central server and provides a site for project collaboration. Users log onto a network with BlueBoard software to access a personalized virtual desktop from which they can share a calendar, a virtual whiteboard, and files.

Technologies further out include a pair of wired Infoscope sunglasses that can help translate foreign languages. The glasses contain a digital camera that photographs the text you're viewing, then beams the image to an IBM server equipped to translate the material and sends it to a mobile device for your perusal.

"IBM will not stop innovating or building faster chips and bigger hard drives," said Robert Morris, vice president of IBM personal systems group and storage director. "We've just decided to put the client front and center and make [it] more productive and easier to manage."