IBM Changes Its z/OS Release Plan
and Extends Its Support

Analyst: Stephen D. Bartlett

IBM – Sometimes it likes to surprise, but sometimes not

IBM is well known for being very protective about its timing of the announcement and delivery of new products or offerings. Most certainly, this is the case when an acquisition is under consideration, with which they have had lots of practice in the last few years. In the mainframe world, they are most protective of the announcement of new hardware families and their specifications. I would hazard a guess that millions have been made by the IT analyst community (but not Clipper Group, I assure you) by speculating on these matters for their clients. However, when it comes to mainframe software, in general, and *z/OS*, in particular, since 2004 IBM has followed the well-publicized practice of delivering new releases of the operating system and key components in late September each year. Furthermore, previews, a peak at a few of the new or significantly enhanced elements, had announced about six months earlier, usually in March. In this case, IBM mainframe marketers wanted their clients to know – well in advance – what was coming down the road. For mainframers, the regularity of IBM's release drumbeat had become very predictable.

When it comes to comparing the process of upgrading hardware versus upgrading systems software, to say there are vast differences would be an understatement. Many of IBM's mainframe clients have experienced the phenomenon known inside the company as the "push-pull" upgrade, generally applicable when making an intergenerational hardware upgrade, done obviously at the customer's discretion. Commonly, with little or no new investment except some time and labor to plan the logistics, IBM's engineers can disconnect and push aside the old mainframe, pull the new one into the same space (sometimes, less), connect it to its I/O complement, and have it powered up and operationally available within just a few hours.[1] IBM has built its reputation in part on assuring compatibility among its mainframe families and their models and their customers have come to expect and appreciate that fact.

In contrast, however, upgrading systems software is a whole different kettle of fish. To simplify this discussion somewhat, let's confine it to a release-to-release upgrade of the operating system. Also, let me add, if it's not obvious, that this issue is by no means a concern limited to the mainframe world, as most of readers of this Log will understand and appreciate. Bringing an enterprise-sized server farm up to a common level of new software is likely to result in a series of long sleepless nights for those responsible, even after many hours of careful planning and practice.

Back in IBM mainframe-land, each new feature and function must be examined and its intersections with other software products must be understood. Most concern is given to database managers, transaction processors, systems management tools, and the interfaces commonly used by user-written applications. When the products involved in this examination are from multiple vendors, as they frequently are, this adds to the complexity of this review process. To complete the rigorous reviews in a timely manner can be quite challenging and could easily consume the most skilled and most scarce technical personnel, as well as the hardware capacity required for the test bed. **The annual release cycle, while delivering higher**

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[1] This is one simple scenario in a range of options for upgrading a processor, which will depend on the existing model, the extent of the upgrade, and whether the system is in a Parallel Sysplex, all of which would be relatively non-disruptive.

levels of functionality, performance, and reliability in a predictable cycle, appears to have exacerbated the problem.

IBM has been concerned about this issue for some time, but felt, up to now, that annual release updates were the most efficient means of delivering timely support for new hardware, additional functionality, and the consolidation of all prior maintenance to z/OS's several components. However, it was observed that only about 5% of their users were migrating regularly to the most current release, and were taking 6-to-12 months to do so. A much larger number, about 60%, were migrating every 2-to-4 years or so, many aligning either with the even number cycle or the odd. When doing so, they often would be trading off the exploitation of new functions against the resources to maintain currency. At the tail end of the distribution, a small number of customers were leaving themselves back level by three or more releases. This practice results in lapsing into an "unsupported" status, with an increase in maintenance costs.[2] Furthermore, in order "to get current", for instance to take advantage of a desired architectural extension or a new software service, a great deal more effort and expense would be required to move ahead through the several releases required to achieve currency and a "supported" status.

A New Two-Year Release Cycle and Extension to the Support Period

On March 12, 2012, at SHARE in Atlanta, GA, IBM's z/OS product managers discussed a new initiative for their product.[3] On April 11, IBM released a Statement of Direction (SOD)[4] that previewed a change in the release cycle extending it from one year to two.[5] This will be accompanied by an extension of support (problem diagnoses, fixes, bypasses, or restriction on use) for a period of five years, compared to three years currently. **IBM's announcement of this very significant change in their practices will result in a new version and release of z/OS –** *Version 2, Release 1 (V2.1)***, which should be generally available in the second half of 2013 with included (covered) support ending in 2H2018.**[6] This release will support the z9, z10, and the current zEnterprise family of *System z* servers. Announcement of the two-year release cycle will provide, at this time, relief to Version 1 customers in 2012, giving them more time to line up their efforts with the new cycle. Accordingly, I would expect that z/OS customers should expect the next release of Version 2 (V2.2) in the second half of 2015.[7]

Customers of current releases will not be left behind or penalized. According to the SOD, customers with V1.12 and V1.13 currently installed will have their support extended to bridge them to the new five-year lifecycle, allowing them to receive maintenance without additional charges. Customers currently on V1.12 will have their support extended *one year* to September 2014, and those currently on V1.13 will have their support extended *two years* to September 2016. However, those still running older releases are not likely to receive any support extensions because their support already has been announced as ending by September 30, 2012 or earlier. A fee-based *Lifecycle Extension Program*, which provides maintenance support, is already available for earlier releases or, in the case of V1.11; I expect that some version of this support likely will be offered in the future. In addition, IBM plans to extend the availability for ordering V1.13 until the General Availability (GA) date of V2.1. For those users contemplating a move to this most current release, doing so within the next year will garner immediately the benefit of two years of additional support.

A Win-Win for Both IBM and its Customers

Technical and management staffs, which currently are occupied with release-to-release planning and migrations, now will have more time to focus on the longer term and, thus, will have more time to exploit any new z/OS functionality. Therefore, overall headcount could be reduced or, preferably, rede-

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[2] At the end of the three-year support period, service would be withdrawn for a release, an established practice. As of the withdrawal of service for z/OS V1.7 in September, 2008, the IBM Lifecycle Extension Program has been available, and subsequently for releases V1.8 through V1.10, as a fee-based corrective service (fix, bypass, or restriction to a problem) for up to two years beyond the withdrawal of service date of the particular release. This allowed a customer to maintain maintenance services from IBM z/OS support specialists for a period of up to five years.

[3] The scope of this announcement does not include the z/VM, z/VSE, or z/TPF operating environments.

[4] An SOD is a declaration of IBM's intent and, as such, is subject to change or withdrawal.

[5] This bulletin has been updated to reflect the additional information made available on April 11th.

[6] When included support ends in 2018, an additional three years of extended service will be available for a fee.

[7] z/OS users should expect that the most current System z server architecture will be required to exploit fully the newest capabilities of that operating system, whereas earlier versions of the architecture (families) may not.

ployed to development projects or the expansion of services to the client community. It is hoped – reasonably – that with fewer and longer migration cycles, customers will be more likely to maintain their currency. Improved currency will facilitate the adoption of the latest technology, both hardware and software, as well as encourage fuller exploitation of new z/OS features and functions that will deliver improved services and better efficiency. In addition, when ISV products are involved, which is a very likely situation, there will be more time and flexibility for all parties to address any issues that may arise. Once implemented, the effect of these changes should go directly to the data center's bottom line and reduce the TCO for z/OS support and operations.

IBM, in turn, will have more time to develop and test each new release, resulting in a cleaner delivery and improved customer satisfaction. With its customers at a higher state of currency, they should be less likely to have to revisit problems or incompatibilities that have already been addressed in later releases. If viewed as a customer satisfaction issue and if this new practice is as popular as IBM expects it will be, the business case for continued adoption of mainframe technologies will be enhanced. The tradeoff here is that IBM is bound to provide maintenance for a particular release for at least five years, which will increase their costs, to some degree.[8]

There is another pony here and it applies equally to customers and IBM. With these calendar changes, z/OS will share the same release and support cycle as most of its other mainframe software products, particularly those in the data management arena, i.e., *DB2* and *IMS*. Keeping these two worlds on compatible release cycles will simplify everyone's challenges.

Existing IBM Migration Support and Practices Continue to Support the Process

IBM will continue to support "N+2" migrations, which allow customers to adopt a four-year release migration cycle – if that serves their interests. As an example, a migration from V2.1 (Version 2 Release 1) to V2.3 will be supported, even though the general availability of these releases spans four years. This is facilitated by maintaining compatible files and facilities, such as system data sets, commands, control block formats, etc., that eliminate the need for customers to do any conversions or customizations in order to install the new release (unless they have foolishly engaged in any out-of-spec tinkering, a practice long discouraged by IBM).

A number of publications, including *z/OS Migration* and *z/OS Planning for Installation*, help customers determine what migration actions might be necessary and help them plan for a new release's requirements (an important tool whose value should not be minimized). "FIXCAT" or "fix category" data are maintained by z/OS to help customers quickly identify, among other things, required coexistence and toleration PTFs that need to be installed on their existing systems prior to migration. Migration health checks automate some of the checking for migration actions, making it easier for customers to determine whether a particular potential migration action might affect any of their systems. Additionally, the *Consoles Tracker Facility* may be used to detect the use of certain system facilities that, if used, must be used differently on a new release. This facility is similar in concept to migration health checks, but its implementation is different in that it detects the use of the code as it actually runs, rather than sampling at a given point in time when the code might (or might not) be in use.

Between releases, IBM will continue to issue corrective PTFs, as well as support for new hardware, whether system or I/O, and implicitly, new features and functions. While few software vendors openly like to focus attention on "how we fix our bugs", IBM's ability to reliably handle, fix, and distribute modifications to their software is truly world class. This is exemplified through facilities such as *Shopz Portal*, which enable clients to electronically configure and download their service. This is aided by standard interfaces that greatly simplify and eliminate errors in the process. In addition, IBM's Statements of Direction (SODs) should continue to provide early notice of some potential migration actions and other areas where there will be changes, typically at least a year in advance of a new release that will be affected. For most customers, this will provide at least two years' effective notice and ample time for the appropriate planning.

What is the New Bottom Line?

In the automobile industry, the warranties beyond the normal three- or four-year period are some-

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[8] I don't expect that this will be a big hit on IBM's technical resources, as most errors are discovered within the first year or two after delivery; most of what's left are "rediscoveries" of what has become well documented.

times perceived as an attempt to cover inherent weaknesses in the quality of a product, or as just a marketing ploy to make the product appear more attractive by lowering the perceived risk by the customer. There are several examples of this in recent years as some non-domestic manufacturers have introduced their products into U.S. markets. **IBM's actions here are indicative of neither of these examples.** If anything, IBM's policies represent an assurance of improved quality and service and are another example of IBM's commitment to protect customers' investments in its leading mainframe system products and to facilitate the lowering of their costs. **The new five-year support for z/OS and the new release lifecycle will result in a lower mainframe TCO for z/OS installations and will provide customers greater opportunity to exploit and benefit from the latest functions and features of each new release and the hardware it supports.**

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