OPINION

Peter Coffee: Epicenters

The mark of Excellence

WINNERS ARE CHOSEN ON HOW WELL THEY SOLVE PROBLEMS

NOW MAKING THEIR FOURTH ANNUAL APPEARance, the eWEEK Excellence Awards have become the gold standard for recognizing value in enterprise infrastructure innovation. Considering only products and services that are genuinely new and genuinely available, each year's screening of hundreds of entries produces a valuable shopping list—not only a guide to what's good but also an up-to-date recommendation as to what's relevant to changing IT needs.

Two things make these awards unique among IT product honors.

First, the Excellence Awards program is not a popularity contest. Year to year, the lists of finalists and winners include both established leaders and startups. We're always pleased to find a category-defining product coming from a company that can hold an all-hands meeting in a full-size SUV.

At the same time, though, this year's slate of honorees reminds us that there's world-class innovative talent at big-name IT companies—companies that are often impugned as being too concerned with stretching product life cycles rather than daring to compete against themselves.

No single company has previously won more than two Excellence Awards trophies in a single year. This year IBM and Microsoft each earned three—and did so by addressing impressively diverse needs.

That very diversity represents a challenge to our evaluation teams. We don't begin with a preconceived list of specific product types, such as firewalls or development environments. Rather, we look for novel and meaningful contributions on 15 different tiers of the IT stack, with competition open to products and services addressing each general area of need. We choose winners based on the contribution they make to solving the problems of today, not on checklists of features or on performance according to narrowly focused benchmarks.

Our past choices have been validated in numerous ways.

Two of our first-year Excellence Awards winners came from Great Plains Software and Rational Software, which were sub-

ering component-based solutions. We take pride in identifying the distinctive potential of nascent IT providers, especially when others subsequently place their own bets on those same contenders.

One common characteristic among many Excellence Awards winners is the ability to slash complexity and contain technical risk within enterprise environments. We get a strong reality check in this area from our eWEEK Corporate Partner Advisory Board members, whose input during judging is the second unique and defining feature of the program. Each honoree reflects the judges' need to simplify their lives by finding and deploying products that play nicely with others.

An ironic example is this year's Enterprise Storage category winner, AppIQ's StorageAuthority Suite. Its multivendor support was the distinguishing strength and the highest-priority area of improvement identified by our enterprise pros.

We made a daunting commitment when we dubbed our inaugural awards program the "first annual." That debut demanded a quantum jump in our product evaluation processes. Building and deploying Web sites for both entry and judging, coordinating teleconference briefings with product teams and users, and assembling the results at a weekly newspaper pace proved challenging.

Now in its fourth iteration, the process has found its groove. It has become part of our annual routine to investigate sev-

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sequently acquired by Microsoft and IBM, respectively. Both companies' talents now reinforce their acquirers' expanding platforms: Great Plains, with its skill in delivering big-company IT power on a midsize budget, and Rational, with its core competence in software quality.

One of this year's finalists, Logic-Library's Logidex, has been chosen by IBM to play an important role in deliv-

eral hundred complex products, combining our own evaluative expertise with that of vendor and user technologists and managers to dig beneath the breathless prose of press releases, white papers and product brochures.

We're pleased to share the results. *e*

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INFRASTRUCTURE

Server Hardware

IBM

eServer BladeCenter

WINNER

IBM's eServer BladeCenter emerged as the winner in the Server Hardware category by providing impressive server blade density in a scalable, resilient chassis while offering flexible hardware support and comprehensive management capabilities.

The BladeCenter effectively integrates servers, networking, storage and management in a compact and scalable package, thus offering enterprise IT managers a robust infrastructure building block suitable for server consolidation efforts at midsize and large enterprises.

The BladeCenter's unmatched blade density is impressive. It delivers the best processor density and performance in its class, supporting as many as 14 two-way Intel Corp. Xeon blades or seven four-way Xeon blades in a 7U (12.25-inch) chassis. In addition, IT managers have the option of outfitting the BladeCenter with dual PowerPC processor blades, revving up the BladeCenter to tackle 64-bit computing.

The BladeCenter provides strong system management and reliability as well. The included IBM Director software and optional Remote Deployment Manager software ease system management, and redundancy features such as the high-availability midplane provide dual connectivity for all modular components.

The BladeCenter adheres to industry-standard technologies, supporting Layer 2-7 Gigabit Ethernet switching and Fibre Channel interconnects for SAN fabrics. It supports Windows, Linux and Novell operating environments.

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