

Five Requirements for Hyperconvergence Software

All of the sudden, software has become all the rage in hyperconvergence. Just the hint of switching from an appliance model to a software model is enough to get financial analysts in a tizzy and the price of a stock soaring. And why wouldn't it? Software is a much better business model than selling appliances.

But even though software is a better business model, most companies start off by shipping appliances. It's just much simpler to sell, whether being sold direct by the vendor or indirect through a reseller or distributor. It's also much easier to develop the software for a limited number of hardware platforms and much easier to support few hardware platforms.

Once that appliance-based product has taken off, the company will want to change to a software business model from a profitability perspective. This can be a difficult pivot to make financially since revenue decreases before profitability improves, and it changes how the sales teams are paid. If the pivot is made successfully, then the company is much more profitable and financially stable.

Even if a pivot to software works out for the vendor, it does not always work out well for the customer – especially if the software model is an appliance “in software clothing.” If you're considering hyperconvergence software, make sure it's not an appliance in disguise. Many vendors will claim to offer hyperconvergence software, but still significantly restrict how their solution can be deployed and used. Ask vendors these questions to determine how much (or how little) flexibility you'll get with their software:

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Can the software be installed on your existing server hardware?

This is the first sniff test of whether it is a true software model or a fake software model. Of course, you need to make sure the hardware has the right specifications to run the software, but you shouldn't need to buy new server hardware. And don't get fooled by the old trick of being able to run “trial” software on your own hardware, but you have to buy new hardware to put the software in production. True infrastructure software vendors like Microsoft, Citrix and VMware do not make you buy new hardware to run their software.



Does your server hardware have to be from an approved list of server SKUs?

If you do want to refresh your hardware when you implement hyperconvergence, does the hyperconvergence software vendor limit you to a certain set of server SKUs? If so, that isn't really software; it's just an appliance vendor separating out the appliance software from the confined set of appliance hardware.



Can you add capacity within the server?

The only way to add capacity with an appliance vendor is by adding another appliance. Even though some vendors offer a storage-only node, the step-up cost of another “pizza box” isn’t trivial. With true hyperconvergence software, enables you can add capacity to an existing server by adding drives to open slots, swapping in higher capacity drives, or by adding servers. If you can only add capacity by adding nodes, you have a fake software model.



Are you being forced into the same appliance software licensing model or do you have a choice?

Hyperconverged appliances tie the software license to the appliance, so when you refresh your hardware you get the privilege of repurchasing the software. This is a “term license,” which means you get to buy the software over and over again, and it’s the only option you have in a fake software model. While many software companies are starting to offer term licenses to provide subscription-like pricing, nearly all software companies still offer a perpetual license that you own forever. You should have a choice of perpetual or term licensing. Do you like the thought of owning the software for life, but don’t want to pay for it all upfront? Just lease the software from any number of leasing companies. It gives you the best of both worlds.



Can you add more memory and CPU resources?

Just like adding storage capacity, you should be able to add additional memory or compute whether inside an existing server or by adding a compute-only server. A true hyperconvergence software model scales storage independent of compute. A fake hyperconvergence software model operates the same way as the appliance model.

Summary

As the hyperconvergence market shifts from appliance offerings to software, vendors that started out selling hardware platforms will need to shake both the appliance business model and the appliance mentality. As you evaluate hyperconvergence, always understand what limitations and costs will be in four or five years when you need to refresh or upgrade.

Infrastructure platforms are evolving quickly, so the ability to scale, choose and change hardware platforms, and use different hypervisors will certainly make life easier. Getting locked in to an inflexible architecture will create much bigger issues for IT down the road. By asking the right questions upfront, you’ll be able to navigate the changing landscape.

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