

NetApp's ONTAP-centric vision, reinforced at Insight 2020, charts a one-size-fits-all approach

NetApp made a flurry of announcements at Insight this year with software enhancements, new products, and an emphasis on cloud and application development. NetApp continued to position ONTAP—the storage OS that long ago veered from its original design intent—as the foundation of data service delivery for all types of applications. NetApp's approach stands in sharp contrast to Dell Technologies' approach, which enables customers to pursue digital strategies with a diverse menu of architectures and interoperable solutions designed to step away from the conventional one-size-fits-all approach.

Data platforms

NetApp's announcements around FAS/AFF platforms and the ONTAP OS included limited hardware advancements and modest software adjustments. Many of the tweaks in ONTAP 9.8 address functionality limitations that have not been issues with Dell Technologies' disk array platforms, for example, tiering to/from datastores on HDDs, tiering to targets within a cluster, the ability to re-start NDMP backups, the ability to exempt selected datastores in metro-cluster implementations, support for a thousand-plus snapshot instances in a namespace, the ability non-disruptively retire nodes from a storage cluster, among other examples. NetApp positioned the new QLC-based FAS 500F array as a limited-use silo within ONTAP clusters because of QLC's low write performance and low endurance for program/erase cycles. This positioning raises the question of how the FAS 500F delivers on ONTAP scaling and operational efficiencies.

With all this taken together, it is difficult to equate consequential innovation with any of NetApp's platform enhancements, particularly when you consider that ONTAP is the hub of NetApp's vision for all applications and storage.

Cloud

Over the past several years, NetApp has been heavily focused on enabling consumption of ONTAP through public cloud services. This year NetApp showcased Spot, a recent software acquisition that optimizes cloud resource utilization. NetApp is repositioning Spot so that it principally adds value to cloud resources interoperating with ONTAP data services.

Ultimately this does little to address a challenge that customers have with NetApp's strategy: Cloud Volumes ONTAP running up costs and introducing more management complexity. How is NetApp addressing critical questions customers have around what vision they have for the future?

With Dell Technologies Cloud solutions, you can approach these questions with best-in-class technology. To solve for management sprawl, Dell Technologies enable customers to leverage technology that they have already purchased and are commonly using today across on-prem and cloud environments: VMware.

Using products that are co-engineered with VMware, customers get familiar and consistent operating models, streamlined infrastructure, and full application mobility.

Additionally, NetApp's strategy for accessing storage in the cloud using an ONTAP VSA further increases spend in the cloud. To reduce cloud storage costs, we offer our Cloud Storage Services for Multi-cloud service which uses familiar storage management tools to access data using compute from AWS, Azure, or GCP without running up compute costs with expensive virtual arrays or large egress fees.

Finally, customers are finding that a cloud strategy needs a complete picture to be successful. Since staking a claim in the cloud industry, NetApp's cloud portfolio reporting shows customer adoption has been slow, and NetApp's acquisitions are attempts to offer a more complete solution. How long are you willing to wait for NetApp to build their portfolio out and integrate these acquisitions? Contrast that to Dell Technologies. We offer a robust portfolio today, beyond just storage, to optimize and simplify your multi-cloud environment.

Application development

NetApp's Project Astra announcement appeals to IT teams and developers to simplify application development by enabling container mobility. The central issue with Project Astra is that it locks customers into NetApp's Cloud Volume Services.

Rather than offering a development foundation based on niche proprietary software, Dell Technologies' application development framework is founded on VMware. The Dell Technologies framework leverages hardware co-engineered with VMware, along with VMware Tanzu. The result is a familiar, consistent, and streamlined operating model and a development pipeline that leverages existing infrastructure investments.

Application developers and IT need partnerships beyond just the storage component of the development workflow. Rather than hinge all aspects of the development pipeline solely around storage, customers need a more holistic solution approach. This is where Dell Technologies' end-to-end portfolio can have a profound impact. Is your organization able to wait on NetApp to build these solutions to catch up to our portfolio?

Conclusion

Looking down the road, it will be interesting to see how creative NetApp will be at keeping ONTAP viable. We are likely to see more hooks and locks that tie ONTAP to evolving applications and cloud services. Chances are high that NetApp will continue to stir up fanfare around dilatory enhancements and patches required to keep ONTAP one-size-fits-all. The bottom line is that we will probably see more of the same at Insight 2021 since NetApp seems determined to keep ONTAP as the hub of customers' infrastructure.