

ISVs Guide to **APPLICATION CERTIFICATION**

Partners are finding the application-certification process for Windows Server 2008 much improved over the 2003 version and are reaping technical and marketing benefits from going through the test. **By Scott Bekker**



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or independent software vendors (ISVs) that are Microsoft partners, the term “Microsoft certification” carries two meanings. One involves the ISV’s level of membership in the Microsoft Partner Program at a company level. The other revolves around whether that ISV’s applications have passed the Microsoft application-certification hurdle, earning the software a logo.

Microsoft made a big investment in the application-certification testing process prior to the Windows Server 2008 launch to make the certification program more valuable to ISVs, less expensive to go through and more applicable to their needs.

Compared to the certification process for Windows Server 2003, the effort seems to be paying off. As of December 2008, 132 ISVs had earned logos for 215 applications for Windows Server 2008. That’s nearly double the number of ISVs—76—that had achieved certification for 112 applications over the same number of months when Windows Server 2003 first came out.

“The growth that we’re seeing is something that we’re very, very happy with,” says Michael Leworthy, lead product manager of the Windows Server Team. With thousands of applications running on the platform, though, Microsoft would like to see the number of certified applications climb substantially, he adds.

Several Microsoft ISV partners who went through the 2008 certification process say they’re very satisfied with the changes made since the Windows Server 2003 release cycle. And while certification remains a technical and financial investment, the ISVs report that going through the process helps improve application quality and provides marketing benefits.

SKIPPING CERTIFICATION IN 2003

Lorenzo Carver, CEO of Denver, Colo.-based bpCentral Inc., which develops a financial software package called Liquid Scenarios for venture capitalists and private-equity companies, skipped the certification process for Windows Server 2003.

“We did build to the test specifications, but it was out of our price range. The way the process was set up then, it wasn’t very clear what you would actually pay for the test. We’re very particular about math here,” Carver says of his lean company, which employs about 14 full-time equivalents. “It could have been anything from \$30,000 to \$40,000 to test it. We can just test it ourselves and it will just cost us a few thousand.”

Phil Lieberman, president of Lieberman Software Corp., a Los Angeles-based Gold Certified Partner and an inveterate Windows application certifier, also skipped the 2003 test. One reason: the cost. “Windows Server 2003 was a great platform, but the test was over-the-top expensive,” says Lieberman, adding that Microsoft wasn’t doing much to promote the certification at the time, either. “The other thing was that 2003 had some tests in it that were totally unacceptable to us—clustering, for example. We support clustering, but some of the requirements were so hard, so time-con-

suming and so dumb that we didn’t want to have anything to do with it.”

It wasn’t all about seeing Microsoft’s process as flawed. Market conditions meant certification wasn’t as important at that time, Lieberman adds: “You could differentiate yourself. There was less of the issue of the product being generic or people putting out requests for proposals and you’d fill out a grid.”

A NEW PROCESS

In the Windows Server 2008 time frame, Microsoft changed a lot of aspects of how the test was conducted.

For years, Microsoft has used an outside testing company, Lionbridge Technologies Inc.’s VeriTest service, for server application-certification tests. In 2008, Microsoft added Wipro Ltd. as a second vendor. Streamlining of the test requirements and the addition of competition between the testing companies has drastically reduced the cost of going through the test. For one thing, the third-party test cost about \$25,000 per run in the Windows Server 2003 release cycle. Now it costs \$8,000 to \$10,000, according to Microsoft.

Originally, test preparation materials consisted of hundreds of pages of documentation that developers pored over to prepare for the test. A major change this time was offering a self-test that ISVs could use on their own applications prior to submitting them to the testing vendor. The self-test allows ISVs to address potential issues, making them much more sure that they will pass with a single test submission (and a single test fee). In the past, ISVs had to submit again, and pay again, if they wanted to repeat a test after failing it.

Microsoft also introduced a lower tier within the logo program called “Works with.” Of the 215 applications with logos, 97 achieved “Works with”

and 118 are “Certified for” Windows Server 2008.

“At \$250 for ‘Works with,’ this makes some form of certification much more available to the masses. But as you can see from the number, ‘Certified for’ still has more takers,” Microsoft’s Leworthy says. “We think it’s because we’ve made the ‘Certified for’ program so much more accessible in 2008.”

Lieberman, whose company had three applications—Random Password Manager, User Manager Pro and Service Account Manager—all certified by March 6, 2008, sees a more important change in the last five years. “The big difference between the 2003 test and the 2008 test is that they listened to the ISVs,” Lieberman says.

As one of the earliest adopters of the Windows Server 2008 process, Lieberman took the opportunity to help shape the program with feedback.

“They did fight. They weren’t pushovers,” Lieberman says of the Microsoft employees involved. “Some of the discussions got really heated. There was, sort of, name calling. But the best answer willed out. Sometimes we won, sometimes they won. But there were really vigorous arguments.”

One area that’s improved from the back-and-forth debate was the wording in the test manual. “Some of the test criteria were ambiguous. We beat them up on that,” Lieberman recalls. “We told Microsoft, ‘You’re going to explicitly say which way is right. We’re not going to fight with Wipro.’ So they backed down on that, and they clarified a lot of the criteria. Their test manual is a lot better now.”

Clustering represented another area of what Lieberman terms “big discussions.” “In the 2003 test, you had to support clustering. The issue is that not all applications are suitable for clustering. There’s just no business rationale that supports clustering in the test. Clustering is not dominant. It doesn’t make sense for

a lot of applications. It’s something that should be an optional part of the test, not a burden on every single ISV,” he says. “After a long discussion on it, [Microsoft] agreed, finally. What they did say was that if you install the application on a clustered machine, it shouldn’t damage the clustered machine. Fine.”

TEST COSTS

Aras Corp. also skipped the 2003 certification cycle, largely because it wasn’t as firmly planted in the Microsoft ecosystem. The Andover, Mass.-based Gold

Certified Partner has since transitioned to the Microsoft platform for 100 percent of its customer base and moved to an open source development model. “Back in 2003, we were a traditional software company, and we were multiplatform—Microsoft, Websphere and Oracle,” says Marc Lind, vice president of marketing for Aras Corp. “We had a Microsoft version, but we had not adopted Microsoft best practices. We did a cursory evaluation on readiness and determined that it would not be practical.”

While the Windows Server 2008 tests are stringent, they’re manageable, Lind says. “It’s not such a big undertaking that ISVs should be scared by what it represents.”


Having the test suite in-house helped control costs, he adds. “Because they provided the test suite itself, we could do the tests internally. It meant that we were able to run periodic tests in advance of submitting. That gave us early catches and things like that,” says Lind, whose company had applications ready to run on Windows Server 2008 as soon as the OS was generally available.

Jon Peterson, vice president of marketing at OSISOFT Inc., a midsize ISV based in San Leandro, Calif., also says that the expense isn’t outrageous, consisting mostly of test fees and personnel time. “We probably put one full-time person on it for several months. Then we had almost two full-time developers for two or three months. Plus me, telling the guys we need to do it.”



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Carver estimates that preparing for and taking the test added 10 percent to 20 percent to the cost of development efforts for Liquid Scenarios at bpCentral, which is a small company. As an early adopter of the test, however, the company was eligible for a Microsoft subsidy. “At the end of the day, we ended up breaking even before we’d even sold the product,” Carver says.

TECHNICAL BENEFITS

Partners that have gone through the certification process cite two main areas of benefit to their businesses: technical and marketing.

Even though certification is a fairly expensive undertaking for a small ISV, the technical benefit more than offsets any costs, Carver says: “We view it as millions of dollars worth of quality assurance.”

“It really forces you, in a good way, to follow all of the little details,” OSIssoft’s Peterson adds. “Much of the certification process is about the installation, which is probably where we spent most of our time.” While that may seem like a hassle, it can pay off later in an extremely smooth install. “You lose some confidence when, right on the install, customers are calling up with issues. That does leave a little bit of a bad taste in a customer’s mouth,” Peterson continues. In contrast, having a smooth installation “basically sent a message to our customers that ‘these OSIssoft guys have a strong organization behind the product.’”

Lieberman has seen application quality improve through the certification process. “We did find some bugs as part of the testing that we didn’t know were

there,” he says. “It did actually improve our code quality and it put some formalities in our program that we didn’t have before. It created better code and created better process. Some parts were aggravating because no one wants to change and everyone has their own way to look at it.”

A bigger issue is that application certification allows all the investment that Microsoft made in improving the security of its platforms from the Trustworthy Computing initiative to trickle down into ISV applications.

“What Microsoft has tried to do is introduce that to the ISV process in a very light version to try to improve the security of products and the quality of products,” Lieberman says. “We look at that and say, ‘OK, we’re not going to do it all in terms of drinking the Kool-Aid,’ but it’s like taking your vitamins and getting your flu shot,” Lieberman says.

“Customers want new features, they don’t want security. But it really is in their best interest. It makes the Windows platform as a whole more secure.”

Sometimes the aggravations turn into business benefits. For Lieberman’s company, it was the certification requirement that logs must be exported in a language-neutral format. “We were exporting in an English format. Most of our customers speak English, and the developers were saying, ‘Ugh, why should we do that?’” Lieberman says. “Now that we’re localizing the product in different countries, we’re glad we did it.”

Carver, of bpCentral, had a similar experience with a certification requirement that the Liquid Scenarios product

run on an eight-core server. “We were actually excited about building an eight-core system to test our application. A lot of software out there isn’t optimized to take advantage of the new CPU architectures. Anything that allows you, or in some cases forces you, to try the multi-core architecture is going to teach you something,” he says.

Carver says that Intel Corp. recently released a case study on bpCentral. “Because of some of the multi-core stuff we did a year and a half ago during the Windows Server 2008 testing, we were able to show a concurrency rating,” he says. “As the number of processors went up, there was a proportional increase in the speed of the application. That was a residual benefit of doing the Windows certification.”

REAPING THE MARKETING BENEFITS

All the ISV executives interviewed agree that the meatiest benefits of application certification came on the marketing side.

Lind says that in the enterprise product lifecycle management (PLM) space where Aras Corp. competes, certification helps on several levels. “As a provider of enterprise PLM solutions, and an enterprise open source provider, we recognize that companies want the assurance that goes along with not only utilizing the Microsoft recommended development practices, but also the validation that is part of this certification. That was part of our reasoning in pursuing certification,” Lind says.

Carver sees several marketing benefits in the certification of Liquid Scenarios.



"Our solutions are kind of expensive, on average about \$6,000 per user per year," he says. "There's a need to cross a credibility chasm quickly to accelerate the sales process. The fact that our stuff is certified for Windows makes a difference."

As a small company, beating larger competitors to the punch by getting certified more quickly has also turned customers' heads, he says: "That actually gives us an advantage in the marketplace. It shows that we have the technological wherewithal to compete with those guys."

Finally, he says, bpCentral sees support benefits. "Servers are complex and lots of things can happen during the year. People are trying to attack them. It's easy to point to a small vendor, and say, 'I wonder if the reason our server's not working is because of your thing.' For us, it's easy to say, 'If you look at the apps that are on your server, how many of those are certified for Windows Server?' Nine times out of 10, we're the only one. It saves us a trip out there to prove that it's not our application causing the problem."

Even for a midsize ISV like Lieberman Software, certification can offer competitive advantage over much larger rivals. "We're not IBM and we're not Microsoft or Symantec or Quest," Lieberman says. "Given that we're a smaller company, the logo portion of things is a way of them saying, irrespective of who we are or who we think we are, these big guys have not gone through the certification process."

Even the biggest ISVs see value. At a partner gathering in Washington, D.C., last fall, Symantec Corp. executives told their resellers that a key selling point for Symantec Backup Exec is that the company always makes sure it's among the first to get the product certified on Windows Server. Partners were told that the certification proves to customers that Symantec puts a high priority on compatibility with the Windows platform.

That said, none of the ISVs interviewed felt that certification automatically leads to sales. "It doesn't," Lieberman says unequivocally. "What I have found,

anecdotally, is that it's what I would call a tipping-point issue. If the customer is considering one solution versus another, then, in some cases, this is a thing that tips it in our favor. Nobody goes out and buys only certified solutions that I'm aware of. But all things being equal, it's the one thing we can say to a customer, 'If you believe this is a generic product, and you're concerned about us, there's no need to be concerned because here's the badge, here's the testing, here's the report.'"

However, in Lieberman's view, Microsoft hasn't done enough to spread

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Marc Lind, Vice President of Marketing, Aras Corp.

the word about certification. "Not every customer sees value in it. Many customers don't know about the logo program," he says.

MICROSOFT'S PERSPECTIVE

A year after Windows Server 2008's release, Microsoft is still investing in certification in ways that it hopes will bolster customer awareness and appreciation of server application certification.

"We have plans for advertising and marketing around the value of certification, which are really going to be pivotal in getting people to certify," Microsoft's Leworthy says.

One change: reorganization of the Windows Server 2008 Web site, which

attracts about 600,000 unique users a month. "At one stage, we provided visitors about 70 clicks off the homepage," Leworthy says. "We've consolidated that to four experience paths. One of those experience paths is find a partner."

This quarter, Microsoft is relaunching the Windows Server catalog in an effort to do a better job of showcasing certified products. The new version will include search engine optimization to improve Web-based hits, more flexibility for ISVs to customize their entries and much more visibility for the catalog across the Microsoft.com Web site. (For more information, visit www.innovationwindowsserver.com.)

Microsoft is also launching a program to provide solution briefs on certified applications for the Microsoft field organization.

'CRAZY NOT TO PARTICIPATE'

Carver says that without Microsoft's certification process, it would be impossible for a small ISV like bpCentral to achieve the quality, security and functionality validations that the application certification provides. "I think a smaller company would have to be crazy not to participate in these programs because there's no other way to get the cost benefit of it," he says. "It's just not economically feasible."

According to Lieberman, so long as Microsoft continues on the course it set for Windows Server 2008 certifications, he'll continue recommending that other ISVs take a good look at the test program.

"Microsoft's actually been a really good partner on this program. This has been very profitable for us, and it's been very good for our mutual customers. The test is a hard test; it does require that you make some improvements to your product," he says. "It's been very worthwhile from a technical and marketing perspective." ●

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–noun

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2. chronic dissatisfaction with avoidable system failures and user support requests
3. a sense of futility in seeking technical support or satisfactory resolution
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