

It's Thursday afternoon. Do you know where your applications are?

Dealing with the horrors of business-critical Access databases

Rohan Pearce (Computerworld) | 29 May, 2014 12:53

Do you know where your applications are? Probably not, according to Fujitsu's Chris Gaskin. At least, not all of them.

Gaskin heads up the IT company's legacy modernisation service, and along with slapping a modern interface on a creaky mainframe application or migrating from aging systems that should have long ago been put out to pasture, his teams around the world have the always-exciting task of dealing with the consequences of shadow IT.

And according to Gaskin, among the horror-filled realms of systems and applications that IT departments aren't aware of lies a particularly twisted phenomenon only hinted at in whatever the enterprise tech equivalent of the [Necronomicon](#)^[1] is: The business-critical Access-based application.

"Access isn't a business-critical database," Gaskin says. "It's designed for a few people for very small amounts of work that isn't business critical." But what it should be used for and what it is used often diverge, leaving businesses in a position where a cup of coffee might wipe out an important application that isn't housed on a backed up server, but on someone's laptop.

And unfortunately like a plague or a particularly virulent clichéd metaphor, it can spread. "It can grow," Gaskin says. "Someone will wander around, see someone else has got this Access database and go, 'Ah — that's almost exactly what I want. Can I have a copy?' They take a copy, slightly change it and now you have two databases."

For the last half-decade or so, Gaskin's division at Fujitsu has partnered with an Australian data migration services company to try to deal the problem of enterprises that suddenly realise there are whole swathes of Access-based applications that IT departments at best have no control over and at worst don't even realise exist.

The company, CU2 Global, is now eyeing a NASDAQ listing and expects to reach a market cap of more than half a billion dollars within the next three years. CU2 produces 2SQL: A discovery and migration tool that helps enterprises shift from Access to SQL Server, potentially as a prelude for jumping to the cloud.

Gaskin's team first employs a 2SQL component dubbed 'The Inspector' which is a network crawling discovery tool that generates reports on the number of Access databases squirreled away in an enterprise and delivers basic metrics.

"Then you can go back to the client and say 'you've got 3000 or 4000' and they might have thought they have one or two hundred of the things. You can actually see which ones have spawned from each other normally."

Gaskin says that in a typical enterprise, about 10 per cent of the applications discovered are deemed mission critical. "So some of them can just be turned off and some of them are really have no purpose at all. Some of them are exactly the same thing run by lots of different people. So you can then start your conversation about 'What are we going to do with these Access databases?'"

After deciding which Access databases matter and which don't, 2SQL can go to work converting those deemed important. When Fujitsu started using 2SQL the portion of Access databases that could be easily migrated averaged around 90 per cent, but these days it's up around 99.5 per cent for most applications. The parts that can't be converted are usually "very idiosyncratic stuff"; "Friday afternoon coding" as Gaskin calls it.

Although the Access plague is not as virulent in Australia as some places, for example northern Europe, Gaskin says it's still a problem in enterprises here.

"One of the things we find is that it's the business – and in legacy modernisation it nearly always is, it's the business that has the biggest problem – it's the business that knows where these Access databases are if anyone does," he says. "IT might actually not know just how bad the problem is."

"If asked to pick any particular vertical that we've been most successful in [with migrating Access to SQL Server], you'd be looking at manufacturing," Gaskin says. "In general, manufacturing and possibly utilities if you include transport and things like that."

"However, Access is everywhere!" he adds. "You do get little places you wouldn't expect Access; people have this Access problem."

References

1. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Necronomicon>

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