



OakTable

By Mogens Nørgaard, Miracle A/S



Dear reader,

Welcome to the 15th OakTable column in Oracle Scene. I'll talk about moving parts, Intel Outside, a warm garage and Support (again). Finally, a bit about Zepto brewing, which you should probably skip to right away, since it is so much more interesting than all the techie stuff.

This is the Oracle Scene issue targeted for the annual Birmingham conference, and although I'm writing this very early August, I can already see that about 30 OakTable members will be there. If that's anything to judge by, it will be a record conference.

Moving Parts

Once a year James Morle of ScaleAbilities holds a good party, and this year was no exception. On July 15, he had arranged for a couple of bands, several beers, some food and a lot of good men and women to meet around his premises...

Among the guests: Dave Ensor (he still denies that he's un-retiring again), Anjo Kolk, and Jeff Needham (all the way from California).

So we naturally had some great chats over one beer (at a time) instead of just enjoying the fantastic weather and the good music. One of the usual subjects was High Availability, and Jeff said something that put the whole thing in a nice, fresh perspective, I think:

Jeff said: "The standard box IS your HA. It never goes down. It's when you add all those moving parts in the form of various software options that you de-stabilise your system."

I thought it was a neat quote. Mind you, Jeff was talking about his favourite

standard box, namely the Proliant DL-585 from HP with Opteron processors in it, but this should hold for all standard boxes. They're built in the same factories as your home PC, and if they have defects it will remove the margin from the manufacturers bottom line – so they just work.

Intel Outside?

It's always surprising to see how predictable old monopolies behave, be they useless phone companies or producers of electronics.

Intel really had a nice market, producing less-than-state-of-the-art processors cheaply for the mass market where they commanded a premium for them. A little competition from AMD and others producing clones could be handled with some discount and even more marketing. They had the dream machine running.

Then, completely predictable, one of the competitors changed the rules. AMD took a chance and designed a new set of processors that addressed weaknesses in Intel's one-size-fits-all strategy AND introduced some new concepts that Intel hadn't thought about, or didn't think of including because they didn't have to.

Gamers were the first to recognise the superiority of AMD processors, but then suddenly the Opteron arrived on the server market, and things got really interesting.

Intel did what you would expect: Denied there were any problems. Increased marketing budgets. Rallied their partners around them (especially Dell). Lowered prices. Told everyone that they were about to unveil something truly amazing.

Intel had personal meetings with, say, managers from HP where they told them how important it was that Proliant machines that ended with a zero (like 580 and 380) were implemented at important customer sites instead of the ones that ended with 5 (585, 385) – which means Opteron.

Intel even succeeded a couple of times in visiting the customers and explaining to them how important and right it would be for them (the customer) to realise that 0 > 5.

At least in Denmark, the market (oh, those customers are difficult to control) still made sure that 80% of the DL's sold was equipped with Opterons.

So it didn't help. The market didn't buy the usual stuff. Accordingly to the Standard Plan Of Monopolies Under Pressure (SPOMUP) they rushed some new processors to market, and are announcing that – once again – there's no problem.

There's a growing realisation in management circles that there are no examples of monopolies successfully handling a situation where a competitor changes the rules of the game. Harvard Business Review as well as The Economist have written about this recently.

A Warm Garage

Some of you may know this, some of you hopefully not: Miracle A/S (Denmark only) is now 32 people and adding a couple a month, but we're still headquartered in my garage, which is not big. It does, though, have the advantage that it's exceedingly hot during the Summer time, so there really isn't anything our people can complain about ☺.

Anyway, before the Summer turned really hot here, we had a new heat record set when we moved in a small box from a big hardware vendor that contained proprietary processors that don't run cool, i.e. they require external cooling arrangements.

Needless to say, that's one of the few things missing in Miracle's HQ. So the next morning the long-suffering folks were greeted with close to 50 degrees Celsius in there.

That, in case you had forgotten, is what it means when you don't run standard boxes but still choose to run Big Iron. If such a small machine (really, it was) can heat up a 65 square meter garage like that, then imagine what it costs you to actually cool a server room.

Oh, and then there was the noise. Thankfully, we used to have an active military airfield nearby, so many of us were used to the noise level from the machine...

Make no mistake: Big Iron will be good for many years to come, but if you don't realise that it's history, legacy and yesteryear, then you're missing something important.

Think about my beloved VMS: It's still the best OS invented, it's still available to run Oracle on, it's still available on splendid hardware. But would you buy it if you had to make a choice today?

It's the same with the old hand-made boxes with their proprietary boxes and proprietary OS'es and need for cool(ing) aids. Forget them.

Sun is a good example: How could anyone live without a multi-CPU 15K or 25K with Solaris? Well, the customers (again!) didn't listen, and now Sun has hurriedly introduced V20, V40, whatever – small boxes with Opterons in them. Good boxes, too.

It's the age of the 4-CPU standard server. Now watch software prices for, say, Oracle come under pressure because the hardware is so cheap that Oracle's pricing become more than 95% of the system price.

Meanwhile, HP is taking advantage of all this and making the Proliants not-so-cheap, but they suddenly have a lot of competition from vendors making 4-CPU Opteron boxes for much less. This is good, it creates more jobs, and helps us all.

Even Dell has announced that they will make Opteron servers. I doubt it. They were just stalling for time, I think. Now that Dell is in financial trouble, they will need the marketing money from Intel even more. Temptation comes in many forms, but always carries a price.

Support Again

In my previous column I felt I had to take on the topic of Oracle Support again, and I had some delightful (even colourful) reactions from readers about this, and the stories they could tell.

It would appear that UKOUG also had some reactions both from readers and Oracle itself, as you can read in other sections of the magazine. Oracle UK members of the OakTable were even contacted. People high up in the hierarchies read my column for the first time. After four years of writing this column I *finally* get some reactions – fantastic ☺.

I was also contacted by the new head of UK Support, Steve Ware, and he told me that Oracle is doing something about it. If you read his piece in this issue carefully, you'll see in and between the lines some good messages, I think.

Changing the way analysts are measured will not in itself change much. However, measuring (and paying) them based on customer satisfaction must by definition be better than if it is based on number of TAR's closed. Especially with proper backing from managers and bosses.

I think Steve had a very good point during our conversation: Analysts will be happier if good service towards the customer, rather than number of closed and soft-closed TAR's, is rewarded. There's nothing like allowing men to actually *work*.

We had a TAR running the other day here in Denmark where the support analyst (from Egypt, not the UK ☺) called my Miracle employee five times in the afternoon to ask again and again if he could go ahead and close it. He ended up suggesting that he "soft-close" it – we could always open another one, you know. That's not working. This type of behaviour suggests that the current system is wrapped around the axle, as James Morle would put it.

We did customer satisfaction surveys in the 90's in Support as the basis for various pay schemes, and of course they represented averages and sums that together can hide many details, but the new system should be better, since it will ask you for your opinion after a TAR is closed. Response rates could also improve this way – they certainly were not great back then.

There's a strong feeling among certain bigwigs in the Oracle community that what is needed is a levelled support offering – that the very experienced customers should get special treatment and that the vast majority of less experienced customers can do nicely with the current system.

This might be true for a few cases, but given the number of new products and releases, I think most DBA's quickly will need special treatment now and then. Yes, some old hands really do not need to receive the "Working with Oracle Support" document in which they are told to fill out all the blanks, and do everything by the book, and all that – yet some might. I think it depends on the situation, not the person, due to the complexity of systems these days.

Regarding metrics in general, you get the behaviour you request, but usually you cannot imagine what you're really requesting. So you adjust and change them the following year. We always hope that it will be better, but usually it's just different.

If the new metrics (and hopefully attitudes) in Oracle UK Support is a success, customers should not in the future have to take special action, ask for reactions, call in personal favours, and escalate their problems to get proper attention.

The real measurement of success— satisfied customers that TELL you, when you MEET them, that they're happy with Support, has been removed from any reality of executive pay packages, and I guess it would be difficult to measure for large organisations. To a small company like Miracle it's the only success criteria.

Why not drop the whole show with split wages, and simply give people in support their good, basic salary? Even when we

recently hired a sales guy in Miracle, we kept to our principle of a standard salary and equal profit sharing among all employees, managers, directors and what have you. In other words, I get the same amount as our receptionist. Rather socialist, you could say, but it also signals that everyone is important in the company.

Thank you again for all your reactions to this topic.

Zepto brewing

As you all know, Zepto means 10 to the minus 21st, which is quite small. Micro breweries are now being joined by Nano breweries, that typically produce 30 litres at a time. But Zepto might be the way to go for all of us, although it only produces about 1 litre of beer per brew.

You'll need very few things, including a coffee machine, some jars and a little barley and hops and yeast.

It still takes the time a beer brew takes, i.e.

a whole day, yet you only get 1 litre out of it. That's just sufficiently stupid to make us all run out and do it.

Fits nicely into the natural schedule of, say, a day of Oracle training, where the breaks can now come in a more naturally spaced fashion, and you truly get your mind off all the boring lecturing stuff.

Miracle A/S will be introducing such courses in the fall (very appropriate). Why not come back a week after the end of the training for a, uhm, refresher?

For a much more detailed description, see <http://www.allaboutbeer.com/features/235coffee.html>

Needless to say, beer brewing will not be a natural part of Miracle Scotland's activities. However, something much more native to Scotland might.



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