

An Inconvenient Data Center

IT likes to talk the green talk, but will principles take a walk when costs rise?

The truth about many vaunted green IT initiatives is that they're just ROI-based business decisions wrapped in environmentally friendly packaging. With the power used by data centers doubling over the past five years and the national average rate for electricity jumping 44% since 2004, for example, it's no mystery why more efficient data centers are all the rage.

But as the economy continues to slow down, will initiatives that focus on the broader environment and cost a bit—or a lot—more be slashed, regardless of their positive impact on the planet?

Don't bet your carbon credits on IT sticking to its green guns: A mere 12% of the 419 business technology professionals we surveyed in our *InformationWeek Analytics Green IT Survey* say they're willing to pay more for a greener product. And while we're being honest, let's admit that virtualization isn't about being green. Sure, it's a great side benefit, but 76% of respondents list greenness as a minor cog in the decision to virtualize.

A case in point is the Cambridge Housing Authority. The agency is based in Cambridge, Mass., one of the hotbeds of the environmental movement, and boasts an extensive green program that includes solar panels on its buildings, paper and waste recycling, educating residents on conserving energy, and a dedicated person working on green initiatives. The CHA recently implemented a server and desktop virtualization project to

streamline operations and better support its 18 remote sites.

"The environmental impact did factor into our thought process, but it was more about the management and other benefits of virtualization," says Pranita Amarasing, CHA's director of administration and policy. "Power savings wasn't a core driver, it was more of a side benefit."

Still, our hearts are mostly in the right place. About half of the business technology professionals we surveyed either have formal green IT policies or are in the process of developing them. The largest group, 39%, lack formal policies but are doing ad hoc green adoption.

The rest? Let's just say we won't release their addresses to the Sierra Club.

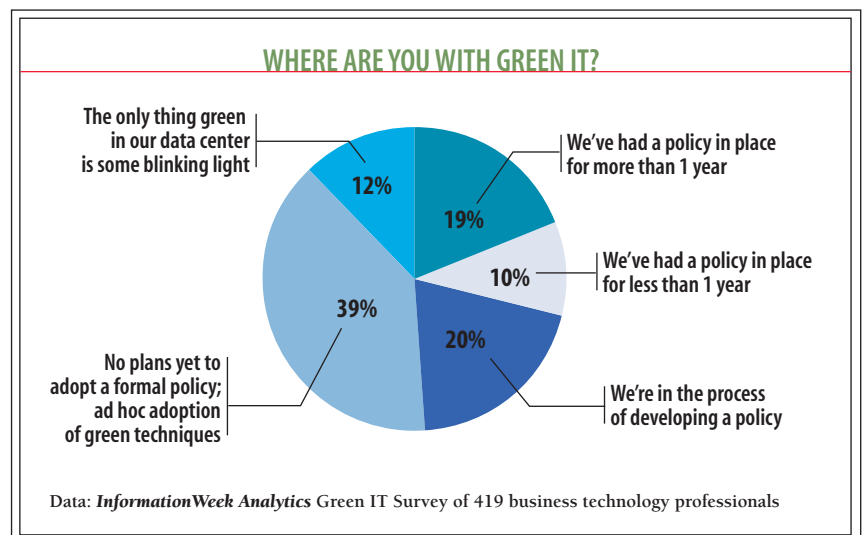
The problem is, unless higher-cost initiatives become mandates, good green intentions will be no match for

red ink on a budget balance sheet. The nascent green IT movement is in for some tumultuous times. A tough economy means increasing focus on the ROI of all investments, green or otherwise. Meanwhile, the changing of the guard in Washington signals a resurgence of pure green initiatives that will add costs, especially around regulating electronic waste and requiring vendors to produce more environmentally friendly systems.

These aren't complementary forces.

Here Come The Feds

In December 2006, Congress directed the Environmental Protection Agency to report on the power usage and growth of data centers and enterprise servers. From that study, the EPA and the Department of Energy have launched two major initiatives that will affect all IT professionals.

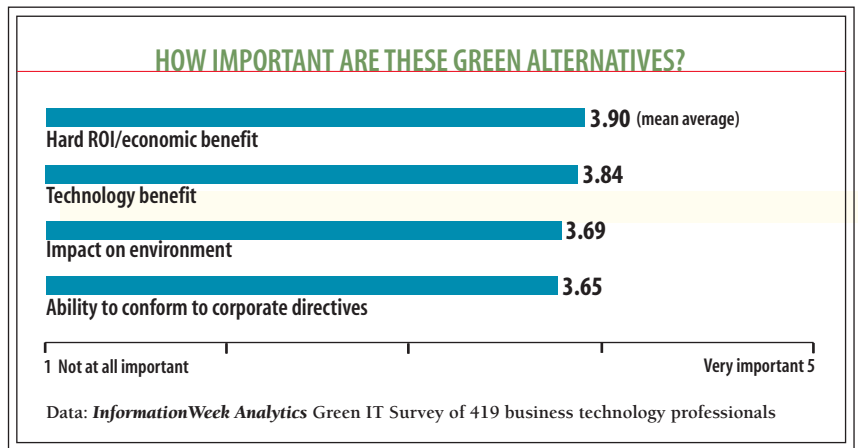


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The first is an Energy Star rating for data centers. The EPA has signed up more than 120 data centers to assist with the collection of statistics that will serve as the basis of the rating. The goal of all this is to create a standard energy efficiency benchmark—think of it as a miles-per-gallon measurement for your data center. Energy Star ratings also are in the works for servers: The EPA is working through the process of creating these, with the biggest issues revolving around the measurement and rating of idle power consumption.

However, nearly all major vendors, including Dell, Hewlett-Packard, and IBM, have raised concerns regarding how the Environmental Protection Agency will rate and rank power consumption. In addition, the standards won't factor in virtualization platform or vendor power management systems.

The EPA says it would be too difficult to write technology-neutral requirements, and the actual power savings would be heavily dependent on user configuration. The agency will require manufacturers to report power management features and virtualization capabilities as part of standard information reporting requirements when the standard is finally



ratified, likely by the end of the year.

Judging by comments left on the EPA's site by major manufacturers, however, we get the sense there's no likelihood vendors will press the EPA to move quickly. Public comments are all very formal and polite, but lots of "strongly disagrees" and "mistakes will be made" pepper the carefully crafted letters. It's a bit like a royal family chat room: "Pardon me, but you don't know jack about blade servers, sir."

Ratings Matter

Why the big emphasis on ratings? The environmentalist in the crowd will point out that a standardized rating lets folks share best practices and compare their efficiency to better pro-

tect the environment. And the libertarians will be just as quick to point out that a standard rating of a data center sets the required foundation for creating a carbon tax or other type of fee system for inefficient energy consumers.

But should the government be involved in such a program? Our survey group was sharply divided on the effectiveness of this type of initiative, with 20% saying it's absolutely necessary and 17% saying absolutely not.

Whatever your stance, one thing is for certain: While the process is slow, it's steady and eventually will result in measurements, which are often a precursor for caps and fees. So whether you like ratings or not, you better get a plan in place.

In our Green IT report, at *greenit.informationweek.com*, we'll sort out the current green landscape and see where your peers are today. This snapshot will help IT decide where they can realistically be in a year, and look ahead to what's on the horizon. We also provide guidelines for embarking on a conservation program, tips on ways to get end users and business leaders on board, and metrics to measure success.

—Mike Healey

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