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Dell plus EqualLogic:

A winning combination

Dell's midrange arrays soar from last to first in our user service and reliability survey.

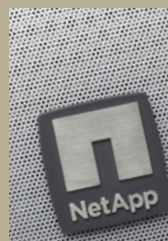
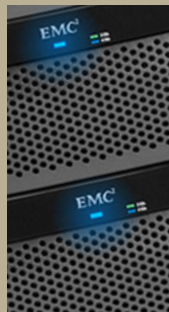
By Rich Castagna

IF THE PEOPLE AT DELL INC.

are reflecting with more than a little satisfaction on their decision to acquire EqualLogic Inc., it's certainly understandable based on the most recent results from the *Storage* magazine Quality Awards (see "[About the survey](#)"). Until it acquired EqualLogic, Dell had relied mainly on its OEM versions of EMC Corp. Clariion arrays for its midrange storage line, and it didn't fare well in any of our previous surveys, ranking ninth out of nine in 2008. But adding EqualLogic to its roster of storage systems appears to have had a dramatic impact. In the 2009 edition of the Quality Awards for midrange arrays, Dell has fashioned a dramatic reversal and leaped to the top of the field based on user surveys

Sales Competence
Initial Quality

Features
Reliability
Tech Support



that for the first time combined Dell's and EqualLogic's products.

This was not the first time EqualLogic products made it to the top of the charts. EqualLogic won the award in 2007 and was runner-up to Compellent Technologies Inc. in 2008—missing out on the top spot by the slimmest of margins. However, Compellent wasn't able to repeat last year's performance, falling to sixth place in the current survey. IBM Corp. also made a significant move up the ranks, rising from a seventh-place finish last year to second this year. IBM was remarkably consistent across all categories of our survey, placing in the top four in every evaluation category—a feat matched only by Dell.

NINE PRODUCTS JOCKEY FOR POSITION

Of the 15 companies and their product lines included in the survey, nine garnered a sufficient number of responses to be considered as finalists, the same number as last year (see [“Products included in the survey”](#)). For the first time, Xiotech Corp. was included in the final results, but its debut was somewhat inauspicious as it finished last overall. With the same number of finalists, the overall ratings were much tighter this year. The spread between first and last in 2008 was 1.44 on a 1.00-8.00 scale; this year the spread was just 0.60. Respondents also seemed less euphoric about their products, as the winning score dropped from Compellent's 7.02 last year to Dell's 6.55 this time around.

Although Dell won the award decisively, it was by no means a runaway. Of the five categories in our survey, four different companies came out on top in at least one category. Dell won two categories, while Compellent, IBM and NetApp each took a turn in the spotlight. The scores bounced around for Hewlett-Packard (HP) Co. and Hitachi Data Systems, but both companies always placed somewhere in the middle. And while EMC, Sun Microsystems Inc. and Xiotech notched respectable scores, they placed consistently toward the back of the pack.

Perhaps reflecting an increasing focus on midrange systems, this year's survey attracted the most responses of any of the four midrange array surveys we've fielded, with 631 respondents providing 1,056 system evaluations. EMC had the largest pool of evaluations with 262, followed by NetApp (155) and HP (151).

ABOUT THE SURVEY

The *Storage* magazine Quality Awards are designed to identify and recognize products that have proven their quality and reliability in actual use. The results are derived from a survey of qualified *Storage* readers who assessed products in five main evaluation categories: sales-force competence, product features, initial product quality, product reliability and technical support. Our methodology incorporates statistically valid polling that eliminates market share as a factor. Our objective is to identify the most reliable product on the market regardless of vendor name, reputation or size. Products are rated on a 1.00-8.00 scale, where 8.00 is the most favorable score.

The respondent pool for this survey skewed toward the small- and medium-sized enterprise, with 70.9% of respondents from companies with less than \$1 billion in revenue. In keeping with most of the prior surveys, financial services/banking was the most represented industry (15.8%) followed by healthcare/pharmaceuticals (13.3%) and IT services (12.3%). Most respondents had operationally oriented titles, with storage administrators being the largest group (29%). In addition, 8% were either CIOs or CTOs, which is a somewhat higher percentage than usual; this probably reflects the composition of smaller organizations where a senior individual is more likely to have direct interaction with storage issues.

Dell had 94 evaluations.

Of the individual respondents, 39.5% had arrays from two or more vendors. For those who provided evaluations of more than one vendor, we compared the head-to-head ratings. The results were quite surprising, turning the order of finish on its head. Xiotech led the finalists with a 62.5% win rate. In contrast, Dell won just 22.4% of its comparisons, besting only Compellent among the finalists (18.8%). There's no direct relationship between head-to-head results and order of finish, but it's unusual to have the lists nearly reversed.

SALES-FORCE COMPETENCE

While Dell dominated the overall survey, de-

fending champ Compellent earned its one bright spot in the sales-force competence category, albeit by a whisker. Compellent scored a 6.43 to lead this category, just 0.01 higher than Dell. This was the lowest high score of any category. The way the two companies achieved their scores was somewhat different as well. Compellent had its highest rating (a 6.77) for the statement “My sales rep is easy to negotiate with.”

RelayHealth, a division of Atlanta-based McKesson Corp., has three Compellent arrays with another on its way. “Sales came in as a team—there was a sales rep and a storage architect,” says Whitney Gray, storage architect at the healthcare provider. “They worked with us on price, [and] they worked with us on technical configuration,” says Gray. “They were very good to work with.”

Dell’s best score in this category (a 6.59) was for “The vendor’s sales support team is knowledgeable.” Compellent received a high mark

(6.68) for “My sales rep keeps my interest foremost,” while Dell fared well with a 6.58 rating for “My sales rep is easy to negotiate with.”

“They took time to learn what we did, to understand what we were doing,” says Donald Wilkins, IT director at Navicure Inc. in Duluth, Ga., of his experience in purchasing multiple EqualLogic arrays. And since Dell’s acquisition of EqualLogic, “for us it hasn’t changed that much,” he says. “The majority of their support staff is still in place, and they still provide some of the best support around.”

IBM apparently has the most knowledgeable sales support team, having received a 6.63 in this regard. NetApp’s sales reps apparently do their homework, as its 6.61 score for the statement “My sales rep is knowledgeable about my industry” outpaced the other eight finalists. Miles O’Neal, IT specialist at Austin, Texas-based engineering firm Intrinsity Inc., was pleased with his dealings with NetApp’s sales team. “They spent a lot of time with us

PRODUCTS INCLUDED IN THE SURVEY

The following product lines were included in the Quality Awards IV survey for midrange arrays:

- 3PAR Inc. InServ E200*
- Atrato Inc. Velocity1000 (V1000)*
- BlueArc Corp. Titan 2000 Series (iSCSI)*
- Compellent Technologies Inc. Storage Center
- DataDirect Networks Inc. S2A6620*
- Dell Inc. CX Series or Dell EqualLogic PS Series
- EMC Corp. Clariion CX Series
- Hewlett-Packard (HP) Co. StorageWorks EVA Series
- Hitachi Data Systems Universal Storage Platform VM, Thunder 9500 V Series or AMS Series
- IBM Corp. FAStT or DS4000/DS6000
- LeftHand Networks Inc. SAN/iQ*
- NetApp FAS200/FAS900/FAS2000/FAS3000 Series
- Pillar Data Systems Axiom 500/600*
- Sun Microsystems Inc. StorageTek 6000 Series or StorageTek FlexLine Series
- Xiotech Corp. Magnitude 3D or Emprise

* Didn't receive a sufficient number of responses to be included among finalists.



answering our questions, talking about roadmaps,” he says. At the time Intrinsicity was considering the NetApp equipment, they were also looking at other vendors’ offerings. “They knew they were up against some competition,” say O’Neal.

NetApp placed third overall in this category with a 6.33. The overall ratings in this category for all vendors topped 6.00, except for Xiotech’s 5.75.

PRODUCT FEATURES

The product features category asks users about the usefulness of various product attributes, including management capabilities, mirroring and replication. This category illustrated the topsy-turvy nature of the top four positions in our survey. IBM bested a bunched-up field with a 6.48, just ahead of NetApp (6.46) and Hitachi (6.45), with Dell a not-so-distant fourth with a 6.40.

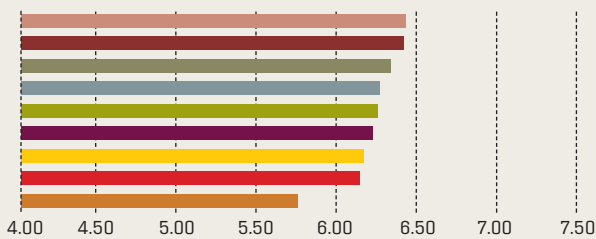
“Everything we’ve needed has been there,”

MIDRANGE ARRAYS

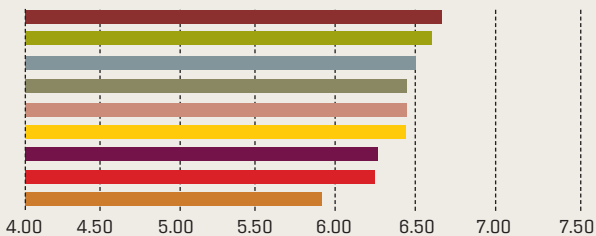
- Dell CX Series or Dell EqualLogic PS Series
- IBM FASTT or DS4000/DS6000
- Hewlett-Packard StorageWorks EVA Series
- NetApp FAS200/FAS900/FAS2000/FAS3000 Series
- Hitachi Data Systems Universal Storage Platform VM, Thunder 9500 V Series or AMS Series
- Compellent Technologies Storage Center
- EMC Clariion CX Series
- Sun StorageTek 6000 Series or StorageTek FlexLine Series
- Xiotech Magnitude 3D or Emprise

Based on a 1.00-8.00 scoring scale

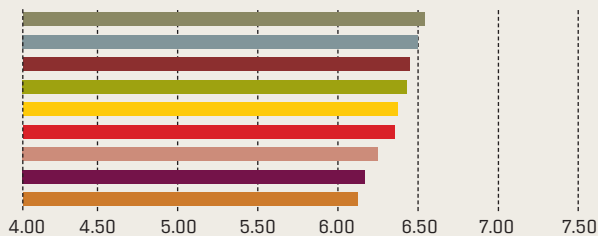
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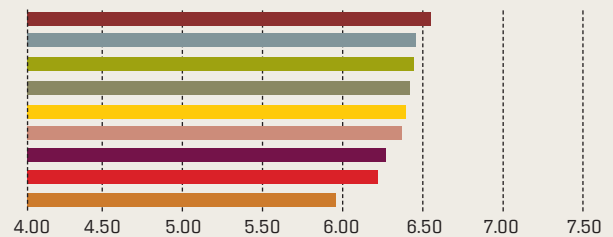
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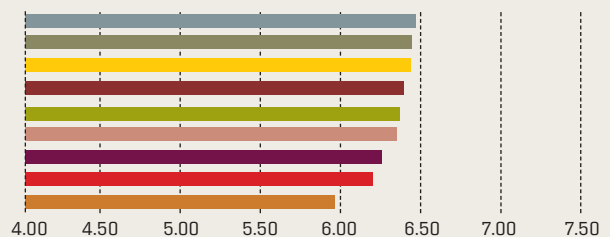
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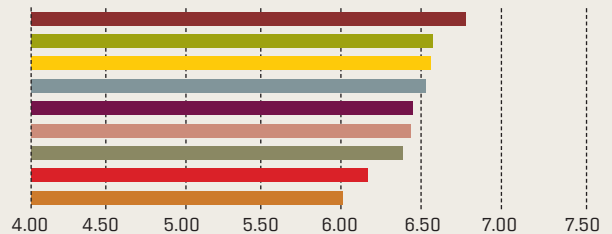
OVERALL RANKINGS



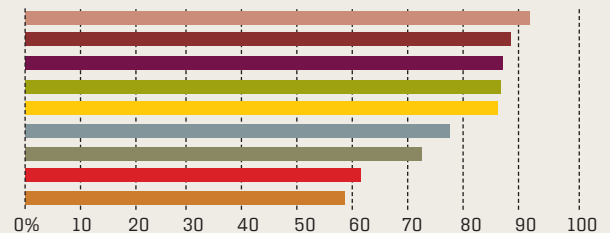
PRODUCT FEATURES



PRODUCT RELIABILITY



BUY AGAIN: All things considered, would you buy this array again?



says Mathew Colona, IT manager at Pite Duncan LLP in San Diego, referring to the Hitachi Adaptable Modular Storage 200 (AMS200) they installed about eight months ago. “With the AMS, I actually think a layperson could use it,” he says. “I think that’s how easy it is; it’s really a point-and-click deal.”

IBM’s best score was for the statement “This product scales to meet my needs” (6.68). Users also rated IBM highly for its overall feature set, giving it a 6.60 for “Overall, this product’s features meet my needs.” Despite finishing sixth in the product features category, Compellent had the highest score for the statement “Overall, the product’s features meet my needs” (6.75). Hitachi’s 6.66 was the second highest rating for that statement.

Having a comprehensive feature set built in is another advantage that midrange systems users consider. “You buy the product and you’ve got all the features,” says Navicure’s Wilkins of his Dell EqualLogic arrays. “It was not à la carte pricing, it was all-inclusive.”

A full slate of features is certainly a requisite for competitive midrange arrays, but performance counts, too. “When we run any type of disk I/O or disk benchmarking utility against it, it just blows us away with the I/O,” says RelayHealth’s Gray of their Compellent systems. “Performance is just screaming.”

Compellent’s category score was dragged down by a 6.09 for “This product is interoperable with other vendors’ products.” While not a bad score, it was enough to lower Compellent’s average score for the category.

NetApp’s highest score (a 6.75) was in response to the statement “This product’s snapshot capabilities meet my needs.”

INITIAL PRODUCT QUALITY

One of Dell’s category wins was in the initial

product quality category. With a 6.67 rating, it nudged out HP (6.60), while IBM ranked third (with a score of 6.50). Very few scores higher than a 7.00 were given to any of the category statements, but Dell had a 7.17 for “This product was installed without defects.” Compellent also received a very high 7.00 for that statement but, once again, its category average was pulled down by a relatively weak 5.75 score for “This product requires very little vendor intervention.”

Apparently, the combination of Dell and EqualLogic has also been good for product quality. “Their quality assurance is still one of the best processes they have out there,” says Navicure’s Wilkins. “They just don’t ship out a defective product.”

HP’s second-place finish in the initial product quality category was helped by a 6.74 for the statement “This product was installed without defects,” plus consistency across the board in the category. Its lowest score, a still-solid 6.53, was for “This product is easy to use.” The highest-rated product in regard to ease of use was Compellent (6.83).

The initial product quality category includes a key statement regarding the system’s value: “This product offers good value for the money.” Compellent was rated most highly in this regard with a 6.68. HP was second with a 6.59, followed closely by IBM with a 6.55. Dell was in the middle of the overall pack for this statement with a 6.44 rating.

While Hitachi ranked only sixth in the category, its score was still just 0.24 points less than leader Dell. “Smooth, smooth” is how Pite Duncan’s Colona describes the installation of his Hitachi Data Systems’ AMS200. “Hitachi includes installation—they won’t sell it to you if they don’t install it. It’s a warranty issue,” he says.

PRODUCT RELIABILITY

Dell’s other category victory was in product reliability, a notable achievement as it led both

"Sales came in as a team—there was a sales rep and a storage architect. They worked with us on price, [and] they worked with us on technical configuration. They were very good to work with."

—Whitney Gray,
storage architect, RelayHealth

the initial product quality and reliability categories. In reliability, Dell's 6.79 was the highest single category score in the survey. HP followed right behind Dell in this category with a 6.57, and Hitachi Data Systems clinched third with a score of 6.55.

Dell's top category score was highlighted by a very high 6.99 for the statement "This product experiences very little downtime." It also garnered an impressive 6.87 for "This product requires very few unplanned patches." Dell didn't do quite as well for "Patches can be applied non-disruptively" (where it scored a 6.56), but it was still the high score of the group for that statement.

Wilkins says Navicure's experiences with their Dell EqualLogic systems reflect that solid score. "Their firmware process has pretty much been a non-event for us," he says. "We haven't had any problems over the last few years."

Compellent had the second-highest score for the "patches" statement with a 6.50, but the statement was NetApp's undoing in this category, as it scored a 5.43, well below its 6.39 category average.

Although he concedes there were some minor issues with a firmware upgrade to his NetApp array, Intrinsicity's O'Neal is more than satisfied with the system's reliability. "In terms of day-to-day operations, it's been rock solid," he says.

TECHNICAL SUPPORT

In the technical support category, NetApp took its turn at the top with a 6.54 that beat out IBM's 6.50 and Dell's 6.44. Intrinsicity gets support for its NetApp machines from their reseller, a situation O'Neal describes as "pretty good" although he adds, "it's not quite as good as when we're dealing direct with NetApp." But with both the reseller's and NetApp's services, he says, "Overall they work hard, and things get fixed generally pretty quick."

Sometimes, direct vendor support is so personalized that it seems more like it's a local reseller providing help than a big, distant vendor. "They gave us an 800-number," says Pite Duncan's Colona regarding Hitachi Data Systems' support for his company's AMS200, "but the engineer who's on site actually gave us his card and cell phone number and said just call him anytime."

This category rarely offers strong differentiators among vendors and such was the case

again. The range between NetApp and last-place Xiotech's 6.11 was the narrowest of any category—a mere 0.43 points. This was also Xiotech's highest category score.

NetApp's top score in this category was a 6.97 for the statement "Vendor supplies support as contractually specified." Among NetApp's

Having a comprehensive feature set built in is another advantage that midrange systems users consider.

survey respondents, 45% purchased their NetApp gear through a reseller. Thus, its high 6.63 score for the statement "Issues rarely require escalation" speaks well of both its own first-level support as well as any first-level support that might be provided by its resellers. Its lowest category score was a 6.08 for "Vendor provides adequate training." It should be noted, however, that most vendors received lower ratings in this area.

BUY IT AGAIN?

When our respondents were asked whether they would make the same purchase decisions today, the results were somewhat surprising. Despite its sixth-place finish overall, Compellent had the highest "Yes" responses to our repurchase question (91.7%). It's no wonder Compellent received a high buy-again rating with satisfied customers like RelayHealth's Gray who says of his firm's Compellent array, "It's the greatest thing since RAID."

Dell was second with 88.3% of those surveyed saying they would repeat the same purchase—a huge increase over its 2008 rating of 60.7%. EMC also jumped up significantly in this regard, garnering an 87.0% positive response vs. a 73.6% for last year. HP had a rating of 86.8%.

This year's survey indicates a dynamic, competitive storage system market segment. With 82% of respondents indicating they would make the same purchase decision again, it's

Sometimes, direct vendor support is so personalized that it seems more like it's a local reseller providing help than a big, distant vendor.

clear that users are generally quite satisfied with their choice of vendors. In this economic climate, that's something to hang on to. ☺

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