

Choice in a Shifting Landscape

A Business Perspective on Enterprise Storage
in the Age of Flash and NVMe

Why care about storage?

As you drive for better business performance through key development initiatives and modern working practices, you will inevitably stress your IT infrastructure in new and different ways. This includes the storage systems that hold your business information - customer data, transaction records, employee documents, and other digital content your business relies on to function. While this may not be something you have thought much about, it's becoming an important consideration in the new world of 'digital'. So what do you need to know to discuss storage requirements and investments with your IT team in an informed and objective manner? Let's start with a look at how the pursuit of business objectives creates data-related challenges that ultimately translate to storage system requirements:

Supporting business growth and development

BUSINESS OBJECTIVES



Drive for customers, market share, revenue and profit

Transformation to digital business and modern working practices

CHALLENGE



More users, more data, more business transactions

Richer, more diverse and faster-flowing information

STORAGE REQUIREMENT



Expandable systems that scale smoothly and predictably

Versatile systems that perform well, whatever you throw at them

Keeping the business running safely and securely



Assure continuous operation of the business

Protect brand reputation and assure regulatory compliance



Ensuring critical data is always available when and where it's needed

Ensuring that data is only accessed by those authorised to do so



Reliable systems that recover quickly from disasters, with no loss of business data

Secure systems that can encrypt and decrypt data on the fly without slowing down

Managing resources, costs and overheads effectively



Focus IT staff on activities that deliver real business value

Reduction of overall IT-related Capex and Opex



Pressure on IT to spend less time on routine administration

Use less space and energy, and extend the life of equipment

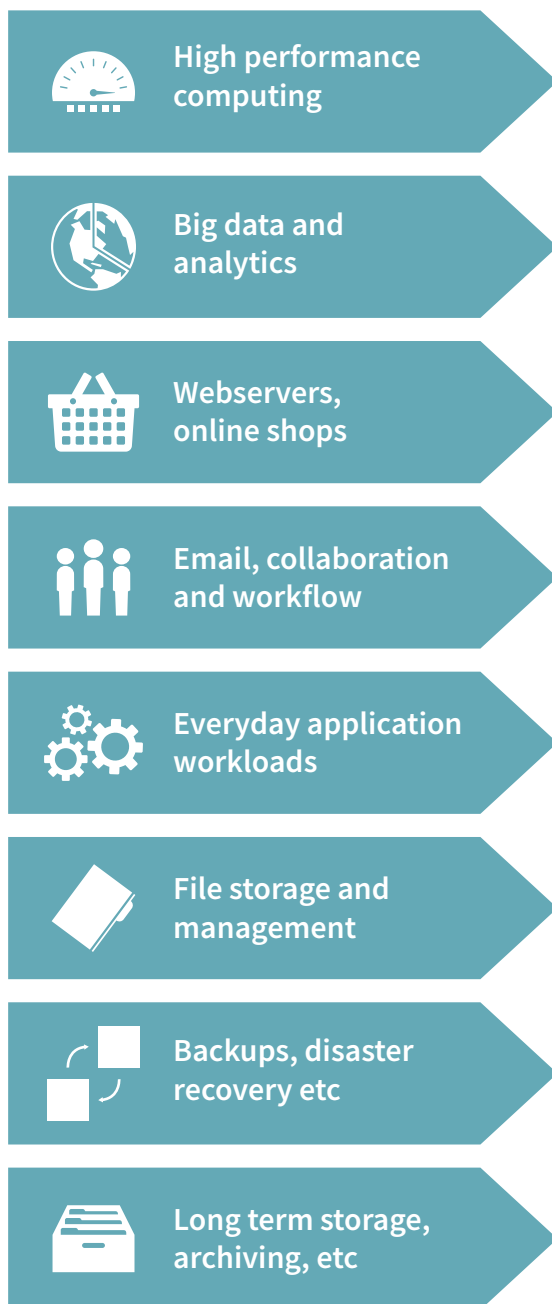


Self-managing systems that mostly look after themselves

Efficient, future-proof systems that don't need to be replaced frequently

Matching storage to your applications

Buying data storage can be a puzzle, and as new terms such as ‘enterprise Flash’ and ‘NVMe’ cross your desk, the potential for confusion grows bigger. It can be hard to filter out the hype and decide what’s worth having.



Data is more dynamic...

At one level, it's simple technological progression: just as desktop PCs with spinning disks gave way to today's laptops and tablets which use non-mechanical Flash memory, so the humming disk arrays of yesteryear can be replaced in the data centre by All-Flash or NVMe arrays whose only moving part is a cooling fan in the power supply.

That only tells part of the story, though. The real key? All data is not equal. Just as there is a continuum from backup files – static images that we keep in case of a disaster – to the fast-moving information that supports electronic collaboration and online commerce, so there is a continuum in data storage too.

Data is static or moves intermittently...

Our demands are changing as well. On the one hand, as we use digital technology to boost business speed and effectiveness, we load more applications and other tasks (workloads, in IT-speak) onto our systems. That demands far more performance from our frontline data storage. On the other hand, new rules and regulations mean that we also need to pay more attention to how we store, manage and protect long-lasting information such as customer data, transaction records and employee documents.

So it is no longer the simple choice of disk or tape. Yes, there are still jobs that disk and tape can do well, but there are others where newer members of the data storage continuum – whether that's NVMe, All-Flash, cloud archiving or something else – will be more appropriate.

This list is illustrative only, and not a definitive ranking

For cloud-based applications, pretty much the entire data storage continuum is also available running in the cloud. However, for applications that run on your own site, the inevitable network delays limit the use of cloud storage to the more static end of the data spectrum, unless the cloud is used in concert with local storage acting as a gateway or staging post.

Tip: The choice of storage for a particular workload or data set is not permanent. Most mainstream storage arrays will support shared workloads very well, but new workloads will appear and old ones will evolve, and an allowance for future uncertainty is essential. So consider your data as a continuum, and plan for a storage infrastructure that can incorporate multiple classes of storage, is mostly self-managing, and which makes it easy to add new workloads and move old ones around.

Understanding your storage options

All-Flash is now the mainstream, the ‘new normal’ for front-line applications, but other storage types – in particular hybrid disk and NVMe – also have their place.

Build a workload profile

Every workload has its attributes, here we list some key ones to discuss with your IT team.

The aim is to connect the technical and practical needs of the business – get it wrong, and you either pay too much or suffer poor performance.

The workload’s	Low			High
Strategic importance	1	2	3	4
Frequently shifting needs	1	2	3	4
Hunger for performance	1	2	3	4
Rate of data change or growth	1	2	3	4
Need for self-optimisation	1	2	3	4

Note that a specific workload’s overall ‘score’ is a guideline, not an absolute. Use it to help build understanding, explore options - including where to consolidate workloads - and align expectations.

Where cost and capacity matter: cloud, disk and tape

WORKLOAD PROFILE

Mostly 1s



Offline and nearline storage such as **cloud, tape and bulk disk** are cost-efficient choices for applications that have a large but relatively predictable need for storage space, and which do not require high performance or fast response times. Backups stored offline may also help you recover from threats such as ransomware.

Mostly 2s



Hybrid disk arrays and NAS (network-attached storage) servers combine cheaper spinning disks with fast Flash. They can be a good balanced option for many business workloads, especially those which need medium to large volumes of cost-effective storage space, and in cases where their relatively high OpEx is not an issue.

The solid-state generation: enterprise Flash and NVMe

Mostly 3s



All-Flash arrays are ideal for applications and platforms that need storage that is not just fast, but consistently fast, whether that is business analytics software, a private cloud platform, or the database behind a webshop, where delays really can cost money. They cost more than disk, but can be cheaper to operate.

Mostly 4s



NVMe is currently the gold standard for versatile, flexible and high performance storage. It is relatively expensive to acquire and implement, but has the density and performance to easily handle multiple fast-changing workloads in parallel. As its adoption grows, it will enable yet more workload consolidation and simplification.

Tip: In your next big storage investment, ask IT if NVMe is part of the specification. If it’s not, could that be a problem for future-proofing the infrastructure, or for the acquisition of skills and experience that will be needed to support innovation as NVMe comes into wider use? For more on NVMe, read our introductory guide ‘NVMe: a fresh start for storage’.

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