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A conversation with the Green Grid



CXO joins Larry Vertal and John Tuccillo for an afternoon conversation with these two board members of The Green Grid.

CXO. First of all can I ask you both to tell me a little bit about your backgrounds?

Larry Vertal. I'm senior strategist with AMD, Advanced Micro Devices. I focus on all sustainability issues across the corporation as well as energy efficiency. I'm a board member of The Green Grid, and have been since we started.

John Tuccillo. I'm vice president of alliances for APC, and in that capacity I work with a variety of different associations, IT partners, and government entities to develop some collaborative solutions based on end use customers' requirements. I also serve on the board for The Green Grid with Larry and nine other members. Both Larry and I have been a part of The Green Grid from its first conceptual conversations until today, where we continue to serve in our capacity as board members.

CXO. When your members come to you for advice, are they looking to tighten up their IT infrastructure or lower costs?

JT. For the longest time the thing we heard was that people were concerned that the IT industry has no commonality of language. What is the common lexicon that we can use to identify what is energy efficiency for a data centre? How do we measure it? What types of measurements should be used? We worked to define these metrics and languages, which we can all start using commonly and then move on to develop some of the comparative data we need to make improvements. That has been the most common comment until now. As things move forward, it's more a question of how can we build upon that, discussing what other methods and measurements can be used so the end user community can identify notable areas of improvements, and so on.

LV. This topic – as well as other questions that we had from people early on – is driven by a central question, which is this: "I want to improve things but if I don't know how to measure it right, how do I improve it?" A lot of the interest in The Green Grid looks to it to answer that question.

CXO. So you're seeing people are needing clarification, a base from which they can talk to each other?

JT. Yes. The industry wasn't paying attention to it because we weren't being driven that way. If you look at the expansion and the reliance that society has on IT, increased utilisation not only improves the quality of life for people but improves the business rational for any variety of industry sectors, and overall does help to reduce our consumption of natural resources.

The industry wasn't faced with ecological concerns until very recently. If an end user needed greater IT support to deliver whatever their requirement was, they would go out and buy some servers or software applications. They would go to the data centre and implement everything without a second thought. There was an expectation that power was abundant, it wasn't hitting IT bills, so there were no consequences.

That legacy thought process doesn't apply anymore. That's one of the things that is driving this need for a commonality of language and metrics. As an industry, your IT organisation must work collaboratively with your facilities organisation, who's also working with the business process owner. Only by those three groups working together can you make improvements, because you can't work from the expectation that there's always going to be clean, reliable, inexpensive power. It's not applicable any longer.

LV. It was understood intuitively by people that ICT was driving enormous productivity in general and saving energy. If you look at the ACEEE study that was done earlier this year, it reports that the increase in productivity from ICT has been about a factor of 10:1 in terms of the watts saved versus the watts used. It was understood that ICT and data centres were a very positive driver in terms of energy efficiency

At the same time, as the world becomes reliant even further on data centres and ICT we must address the negative side, which is the actual consumption. One of those key areas has been getting facilities and IT in organisations to communicate with each other so that a corporation or an organisation has a full understanding of the costs of

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CXO. What have been some of the solutions in terms of the operational aspect of implementing lower energy use policies?

JT. If you look at The Green Grid website there are a number of papers that have been produced on this topic over the past year. We have produced best practices in cooling architectures, also power, power consumption, power distribution, and metrics.

The most important thing is for people to measure their energy use. If you start with the discipline of measuring what your data centre power consumption is versus the IT percentage of that data centre power consumption is, you start to get a clear perspective of how you can make improvements.

There are implications of increasing capability in one zone of the data centre versus another, what the power consumption and the power costs of that change would be and so on. This follows the methodology of sharing the information, starting with the perspective of measurement. It doesn't have to be too sophisticated.

LV. There are two areas that we see a lot of activity in a positive way. One is virtualisation, and the other is the very simple extension of sneaker net: walking around with a clipboard, sub-metering. So many data centres around the world have just one big electricity meter going in, but the more advanced data centres have an understanding that by sub-metering electrical use you can get a better and more granular view of how power is being used.

JT. The Green Grid's technical committee is broken into four groups: operations, technology and strategy, metrics and measurement, and data collection and analysis. You might wonder why didn't we structure ourselves based on components of the data centre. We recognised early on that we had to consider the entire data centre on a holistic basis. All these different areas had to come together to make those improvements.

There are people looking at recently emerged technologies, emerging technologies, consensual technologies, and how can they make improvements in a data centre, but it doesn't stop there. That work is then shared with the metrics and measurements guys. Then that work is then challenged by the operations working group. Any time we advance material it always goes through that process. We get asked frequently, "What is that silver bullet? What are the things that I can do right now that's going to improve my energy profile? How is it that I can essentially do more for less?" There is a number of things that any data centre operator can do to improve their energy efficiency profile. It doesn't necessarily require a silver bullet.

From your small, medium sized data centre up to large and extra large data centre, things such as good governance can really make a difference. We continue to look at this as being a holistic challenge. It's better to make changes to the data centre that are improving your computing per watt consumed, but from a collaborative perspective and understanding the metrics that are going to improve that. That's also why we say to start off with an assessment of your energy use.

Taking that to a point of operationalising the execution, based on the individual data centre, there may be the need and opportunity for newer technologies, but what we're finding is a lot of the basic blocking and tackling – which is available today – is not being used on a broad scale. Today roughly 20% of The Green Grid membership is constituted of end-use customers, folks who are managing a variety of different sized data centres. That's one of the epiphanies that have come from this forum of opened and shared learning is that there are lots of things anyone could be doing today that they aren't, things that can markedly improve their current situation.

CXO. You must be very proud of The Green Grid and what it has achieved.

LV. Yes, The Green Grid is definitely a source of pride to the ICT industry, and should be. When we started on this journey many people said, "You're out of your minds. How do you get as competitive an industry as this to work together?" If you look at members of The Green Grid at board level (Dell and HP, Sun and IBM, AMD and Intel), the fact that these organisations have been able to work together to further our mission is compelling. This is because of the care that the founding board members took at the very beginning to structure The Green Grid so that it could operate as a consortium of equals.

I take pride on this on behalf of The Green Grid. It's unprecedented; getting these competitors to work together, and shows they understand this is an important issue. That's my soapbox, John!

JT. You brought a tear to my eye, Larry! (*laughs*) It's not to say it's not without its challenges. If you could imagine putting a roomful of competitors saying, "All right, folks, we're all following the same rulebook on process. We've all signed up for this particular IP protection. We look at how we're going to work together. Here's the challenge." You can imagine the debate that goes on.

It's a hard debate but for the right mission, and to get these folks to come together under our established processes and then be able to deliver is testament to the importance of the issue for the industry.

Where you might think the IT vendor community might be vociferous competitors and debaters in these forums, and they are, it's nothing compared to what you see in the end user community who participate in the debates! But under the protection of the process everyone does contribute. Everyone is protected and the fruits of the labour are beginning to come through pretty darn quickly.

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