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Industry momentum edges toward server blades

By [Rick Merritt](#)
[EE Times](#)

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San Jose, Calif. - The move to server blades is slowly gaining momentum as Intel Corp. prepares to announce its first blade-based servers next month. Separately, the Blade Systems Alliance has added QLogic Corp. and Sun Microsystems Inc. as executive members and kicked off a committee, chaired by Sun, which aims to frame the technical agenda of the ad hoc industry trade group by the end of September.

Intel will show unbranded versions of the IBM BladeCenter products at the Intel Developer Forum here next month, aiming at second- and third-tier OEMs and integrators. IBM's BladeCenter, launched last September, provides 14 slots in a 7U chassis and can accommodate up to 168 Xeon processors on a Gigabit Ethernet backplane.

The Intel products will sport a new common management interface with links to system hardware not found on IBM's current products.

"We are looking to drive the management interface layer," said Patrick Buddenbaum, blade product manager in Intel's server group. He would not detail that interface in advance of the conference.

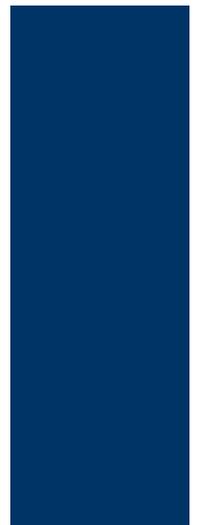
The Intel blades are the result of a co-development deal struck with IBM Corp. last year. The two companies will continue to design common server blade cards jointly, based on future Intel processors and chip sets, Buddenbaum said.

Committee coalesces

At least two Taiwanese OEMs are already showing server blade designs, and four or five more are preparing such designs, according to Anil Vasudeva, principal analyst at Imex Research (San Jose).

Separately, about 30 people from about 15 companies attended a meeting of the Blade Systems Alliance (www.bladesystems.org) here last Tuesday. At the meeting, Frank Schwartz, manager of blade architecture and standards at Sun, took on leadership of a fledgling technical committee that includes members from F5 Networks, Sharkrack and Veritas Software.

In advance of the technical committee's first meeting, Schwartz said the group will probably point to other standards efforts rather than try to define standards for blades, which are modular computers on



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adapter cards slotted into dense chassis-based systems. However, he said the standards efforts that do exist address some, but not all, of the concerns of blades.

"I would call the blade standards out there today a Swiss cheese. But we are still learning about this field, and the amount of feedback we are getting from users in the field is coming in slowly," he said.

Indeed, fewer than 85,000 blade systems were sold in 2002, but that figure is expected to rise to 1 million systems, valued at \$1.2 billion, by 2006, according to International Data Corp. (Framingham, Mass.).

The Blade Systems Alliance is already weighing in on technical standards for blade chassis. A working group on racking will develop a handbook on issues including power, thermal design, monitoring, control and cable management.

"The thermal issues for blades don't match with most of the other systems in a data center today. This is a serious issue, and it's not getting enough attention," said Schwartz.

The alliance plans to host a blade interoperability demo at the Storage Networking World conference, scheduled for Oct. 27-30 in Orlando, Fla. (see www.storagenetworkingworld.com/orlando_2003). QLogic (Aliso Viejo, Calif.), whose Fibre Channel ASICs appear on many blade systems, is coordinating the demo effort, which will include blade servers from Hewlett-Packard, IBM and RLX Technologies.

Big-name holdouts

A number of the largest OEMs already providing blade servers have yet to make any commitment to the new trade association. "We have ongoing dialogues with Cisco, HP, IBM and Fujitsu-Siemens," said Ed Doody, executive director of the group, which currently has about 30 members. In addition to Unisys and Wind River Systems, a number of small or startup companies are members, including Mellanox Technologies (Santa Clara, Calif.) and InfiniCon Systems Inc. (King of Prussia, Pa.).

Earlier this year the alliance moved away from efforts to set standards for interchangeable blades and chassis and focused primarily on market education. That has opened the door to getting support from big OEMs like Sun and others that want to keep their chassis and cards proprietary, said Ryan Klein of Qlogic, who is heading up the alliance's interoperability demo.

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