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Revived, restored and raring to go!
By Ian Murphy

Whatever happened to Gupta? Well when the opportunity arose to find out we sent Ian Murphy off to meet the current senior management team to find out exactly what happened to the company, discover what they are doing now and what the future holds.

In the late 1980's through to the early 1990's Gupta with its SQL Windows development environment was a serious player. Then it got into the name game, called itself Centura and all but disappeared. Now it is back and has gone cross-platform.

Successful disappearing and reappearing tricks are rare in the world of IT. Once your day is done, you are expected to just ride off into the sunset. Not so for Gupta, or should we say Gupta Technologies, which has obviously decided that there is life in the old dog yet. Developer Times sat the key people down to find out where they've been, why they are back and should we take them seriously?

Over a decade ago Gupta, with its flagship product SQL Windows was head to head with Sybase for dominance of the Rapid Application Development (RAD) market. While Sybase appeared to stand still, Gupta previewed a new product called Team Developer (TD). Sitting on top of SQLBase, Gupta's own relational database engine, TD sported a lot of new object ideas and was a big change to SQL Windows.

TD was not one of the better version 1 products to ever hit the market. It had a lot of bugs and limitations although Gupta were determined to fix them. This should have been the start of a long profitable journey for Gupta until it all went wrong.

Two things happened: firstly, the company decided to rename itself to Centura and secondly, in the UK there was a change of key personnel that led to a disengagement from developers and the press. Meanwhile, bugs that should not have been that hard to spot and remove from TD were not being fixed, and it didn't take long before developers looked around and found other tools.

This was sad. SQLBase was, and still is, a perfectly good database. It was small but efficient and was easier to get to grips with than other databases. It also came with TD and you could embed it into your application and the customer wouldn't need to worry about it.

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At this point, Centura seemed to drop off the development radar. Staff losses and the decline of the company were documented in several developer titles and that seemed to be it. Then suddenly we were asked if DT wanted to meet with Gupta, talk to key members of staff and take a loom at its new Team Developer 2005 product. DT jumped at the chance and over two days had the chance to talk to a number of the technical staff as well as sit down with Jeff Bailey, CEO and Chuck Stevenson, CTO.

However, before the new and invigorated Gupta can be taken seriously, DT wanted some answers as to what went wrong. Bailey said "the company has been through a lot of trauma and was eventually sold for just US$5m to a cash investment company called Platinum back in 2001. The Centura name was dropped and changed back to Gupta and now to Gupta Technologies."

He added, "We were a good buy for Platinum and generated positive cash flow. Now they have sold us for US $20m to Isis Capital Management. They have put together money from a number of sources and created an investor group. We expect to have money available for marketing and sales to enable us to rebuild the company from the solid base we now have. Growth will come from both within and as we will have an immediate infusion of capital, where there are companies that fit, we will buy them."

One of the things that kept Gupta going throughout its troubles was the impressive loyalty of its customer base. It gained from people not wanting to rewrite or destabilise their existing tools and SQLBase, as an embedded database, was a steady earner in upgrade fees. Last year, both Novell and Red Hat announced their support for SQLBase on Linux.

Linux is becoming a crowded database arena and it is difficult to stand out. So why would Gupta move to Linux?

Stevenson said "we moved SQLBase to Linux last year and it has been well received by both customers and the Linux community. We have made it simple for people to move from Windows to Linux using SQLBase. This is done by simply copying the files from one machine to the other. There is no need to recompile code, unload data or do a migration. This gives us a significant edge over the competition."

The success of the SQLBase move has had a significant impact on where Gupta appears to be positioning itself. It has just release the first version of Team Developer (TD) with support for both Windows and Linux. This is a bold move yet all is not as it seems as the move to Linux is not yet a true port.

Stevenson explained "we are using WINE (Wine Is Not an Emulator) to allow Team Developer to run on Linux. We will be shipping it with the software and have made some changes to ensure that it works as we need it."

For those who have not come across WINE before, it is an Open Source implementation of the Windows Application Programming Interfaces

(APIs). It is used by developers who want to move their code between Windows and Unix/Linux based environment without rewriting it.

While there is intrinsically nothing wrong with Gupta using WINE, the fact that TD needs a tuned version instead of running on the generic version is a concern. It suggests that there is still a significant amount of work left before the code is clean. This is not the case with SQLBase which is a version of the database compiled onto the Linux platform.

If Gupta is not going to produce a native version for Linux, why do it?

Stevenson is very clear about the reasons for moving to Linux. "We are seeing the second wave of Linux adoption. Developers need to write business tools and at the moment there are very few development tools available to them. With TD, developers can now write just one set of source code and simply compile for the environment. This means that applications can be developed in around half the time of existing Linux tools."

This is an interesting but risky move. A number of vendors have tried previously to create cross-platform development environment with varying degrees of success. Most required some code to be rewritten and developers have been generally resistant to that. This was the problem that Borland faced when it tried to persuade software houses to move their code from Delphi running on Windows to Kylix running on Linux.

For Stevenson, getting this right is a big goal for Gupta. "Cross-platform development is important to many of our customers who want to move from Windows to Linux. This has been shown by the sales of SQLBase for Linux and why we made it easy to move your data."

One of the problems that Gupta faces is the slow pace of change for TD. The lack of investment over many years has meant that it still lacks features that take time to design, code, test and implement. One of those is XML. Stevenson admits that they ran out of time to make XML stable in TD 2005. It will appear later this year in an interim release of TD but will only be available to customers on a maintenance contract.

Moving forward, the big markets are no longer Europe or the USA. The Far East, Russia and even South America are showing significant sales pick-up. This means that Gupta are going to accelerate their work on Unicode. Both SQLBase and TD will provide Unicode support in their next major releases which should be early 2006. At the same time there is a lot of work being done to ensure that TD has a new cross-platform GUI engine so that developers do not need to care what platform they are working on.

So at the end of this, does the future look more positive for Gupta? To be honest, it's still too early to say. Once applications begin to appear running on both Linux and Windows, there will be real evidence of things getting better. Acquisitions, as and when they occur, will need to be carefully scrutinised to see if they have a beneficial impact for customers and the company.

Most of all, however, Gupta will need to ensure that it doesn't slip back into bad habits and fail to fix bugs quickly. A more open approach to shipping fixes to customers, even if they don't buy a support contract would indicate a change of mindset into retaining customers.