

The IBM Midrange - A 3D Strategy Game

There's no rule saying IBM can't pursue more than one strategy at the same time. In other words, instead of picturing a single roadmap leading into the future picture a couple of larger roadmaps overlaying the one IBM stresses. It's quite possible that the people who are promoting the current roadmap aren't even aware that higher and larger ones exist.

Back in the day one of the major selling points for an AS/400 was that everything was bundled together and designed to work seamlessly from the get-go (meaning the operating system, the database, the hardware and the programming language). Windows, in comparison, kept falling apart because add-on after add-on was bolted onto the base product without a high-level integration design monitoring everything. Now that IBM has been unbundling its midrange machine for awhile, separating the pieces - hardware, database, operating system, and languages - it might be a good time for people to take a closer look at the impact this strategy will have on their careers not just from the viewpoint of what the public roadmap shows, but also from the viewpoint of what some of the larger strategies might be. You can be sure of one thing - once IBM figures out what the true value of each part of the former bundle is worth it will make changes.

From my perspective the hardware is the most valuable piece, not only now but well into the future, especially when you consider that the processors are also being used in Watson and form the core of a lot of the cloud machines. The value of the other pieces will be less than the hardware but they'll also gain or lose value according to how the three remaining pieces are used.

If many companies convert to a SQL database, or some other type of database, then that lowers the value of the native database. A lot of places are already doing this, hiring a database administrator to control the new database while prohibiting physical files from being created. Going forward at these companies, everything is a table.

After that separation takes place then the value of the RPG programming language comes into question. Many applications can be written in different programming languages by programmers who get paid less so that will lower the value of RPG. Since the new database is most likely going to be operating in a Linux environment then that lowers the value of the IBM I operating system too. RPG and the IBM i operating system go hand-in-hand when it comes down to this.

So what should you do if you're an RPG programmer in your mid-40s to mid-50s? It depends on whether you like working more with databases, applications or operating systems.

If you like working with databases then you should become heavily engaged in the process of moving over to the new database (probably SQL) if your company decides to go that route. This will let you qualify as a database administrator either at your present company or somewhere else.

If you like working with applications then you should become a Business Analyst, turning however many silos you're the subject matter expert on into a conglomeration that you can be the Business Analyst for. This position is probably the one with the best chance of still being around even after the two strategies above the current roadmap have taken place. And learn SQL, Java, Javascript and PHP, in that order. If you have some time left over then learn Python too. Aside from RPG, these are the languages that will be used most often on the platform.

If you like being a system administrator then learn Linux. And learn to love working in the cloud.

As far as what not to become goes, definitely don't become a Project Manager - that's going to be one of the first job titles to disappear. Becoming a Cybersecurity Expert will get you through the roadmap strategy and the next higher strategy (the selling off of the lower value pieces) but that position will be eliminated by the highest strategy. If you're young you might want to avoid that title too.

Here are the 3 strategic levels in an easy to see format -

Level 1 - Broaden the number of languages and databases on the platform while modernizing the RPG language.

Level 2 - Offload the costs of maintaining the RPG language, native database and operating by selling those pieces to one of the top four vendors who are consolidating the market (HelpSystems, Syncsort/Vision, Fresche Legacy or Rocket Software).

Level 3 - Train an AI program like Watson how to write programs and then sell them as commodities to companies via Business Analysts working at those companies.

In summary, interesting times lie ahead. Keep in mind that 'May you live in interesting times' was an old Chinese curse.