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Beth Bumbarger, CEO of Nemonix, says swapping out of VAX machines can be costly, which is why there are still as many as 175,000 of them still in operation.

Just the VAX, ma'am

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"Out with the old and in with the new" is a motto many technology professionals live by.

Not so for Nemonix, a company that has remained one of the few VAX product and service providers.

Throughout the '80s, VAX (Virtual Address eXtension) 32-bit computers helped Digital Equipment Corp. achieve exceptional success. Today VAX machines are no longer manufactured, and DEC is now part of Hewlett-Packard by way of HP's acquisition of Compaq.

Yet there are still 175,000 VAX workstations and mainframes in operation in

the United States, machines that run mission-critical applications for government agencies and large corporations.

"Customers still using VAXs don't want to give them up, because those machines don't fail," said Beth Bumbarger, chief executive officer of Nemonix in Holliston. "PCs of today go down all the time, but the mean time between failures with the VAX is about six years."

There have been many occasions when a company calls in Nemonix to repair a VAX that has been in operation for 20 years with no failures. "They have to call us in because the machine never failed, so no one on staff knows what to do."

The cost associated with swapping out a VAX in terms of equipment and retraining

employees also keeps customers steadfast VAX fans, Bumbarger said.

But there's also the ability to add new capabilities, courtesy of Nemonix, which continues to develop an array of new products and services for VAXs.

Nemonix developed its first add-on for the VAX 750. The company doubled the machine's memory capacity and added a clock accelerator, which governs how fast the machine runs. As a result, the machine runs 30 percent faster.

More recently Nemonix developed an Ultra-Wide SCSI Adapter. A VAX-native small computer system interface (SCSI) runs 1.5 megabytes per second, while Nemonix's SCSI controller runs 20 Mbps.

The list of add-ons and services contin-

ues with CPU and cache upgrades, Ethernet adapters, custom engineering, repairs, parts locator and a recently introduced support hotline.

With all these options to choose from, Nemonix has been able to maintain a base of about 2,000 Fortune 500 and Fortune 1,000 customers.

The company's products sell at about \$8,000 at the high end, and at the low-end for about \$1,500, a range that has enabled the \$1 million company to achieve profitability. Not bad for a 12-person organization, although it does draw on the talent of 50 on-call engineers.

And not bad for Bumbarger, who at one point was asked by a computer science teacher never to touch a computer again after she erased the entire student body database by mistake.

After a stint teaching word processing and programming languages, she ended up teaching DEC employees and customers the Cobol programming language and courses on operating systems.

Ironically, Bumbarger's former computer science teacher, Bill Stanton, became one of her students.

"He walked into the classroom and took

one look at me and said, 'You've come a long way, baby,' " Bumbarger said.

It was at Digital that she met her husband, Daniel. Soon after, their son was born, and Bumbarger became a stay-at-home mother for 13 years.

But in 2001 she stepped back into the game to help her husband run Nemonix, which he had started in 1985. She hit the ground running, becoming the CEO in charge of sales and marketing.

Moving forward, the husband-and-wife duo plan to expand their product and support offerings to HP's Alpha and Itanium lines.

"We know that the VAX is going to diminish in numbers over time, so we plan to do the same things we've been doing, but now we're looking at other lines that HP might not support in the years ahead," Bumbarger said.

This is good news for Nemonix partners such as ELI Inc., a Cambridge-based provider of new and used computer equipment and maintenance services.

About 60 percent of ELI's business comes from VAX and Alpha machines. It has been working with Nemonix for more than 15 years as a reseller of Nemonix's VAX SCSI controllers, Ethernet controllers and expanded memory options.

"They've always been ahead of the curve when it came to Digital," said Neal Heffron, vice president of ELI. "They would come up with VAX options that Digital didn't even have yet. They really are the sole supplier of upgrades."

Metso Automation, a Worcester-based division of Metso Corp. in Helsinki, Finland, that makes valves under the brand name Jamesbury for the pulp, paper, chemical and petroleum industries, also has a long history with Nemonix.

The relationship began when Nemonix installed its clock accelerator on Metso Automation's VAX machine.

At one point Metso Automation was mulling putting in a storage product made by MTI for its VAX but opted instead to go with a storage solution developed by Nemonix.

"We looked at MTI storage product that ran on FDDI (Fiber Distributed Data Interface) network fiber as a DEC solution, but the problem was it was far more expensive and complex compared to using the Nemonix product," said Norm Raphael, technical support manager at Metso Automation. "With Nemonix we get the performance we need and FDDI interconnected at a greatly reduced cost."