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BUSINESS CENTER Apr 2, 2009 5:20 pm

Apple Hints at Launch of Nehalem-based Xserve

By Agam Shah, IDG News

An Apple online store is set to take preorders of new Xserve servers carrying Intel's new Xeon chips, hinting at launch of the devices in the near future.

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A notice on Apple's Hong Kong online store is offering to take [preorders](#) of the Xserve based on Intel's latest Xeon server chips. However, preorders cannot be placed as the link hasn't been activated yet, and customization capabilities for the old Xserve products have been disabled.

"Preorder the new Xserve with Intel Xeon (Nehalem)," the Web page states.

Apple does not comment on future products, an Apple spokesperson said. It is unclear when the servers would be released, though enthusiast sites including AppleInsider have [predicted availability](#) in a few weeks.

The upcoming servers could carry quad-core chips from the Xeon 5500 and 3500 family, which Apple has already included in its Mac Pro workstations launched last month.

Intel has said the Xeon chips are its fastest server chips to date, which can be cranked up to run at speeds of 3.46GHz.

Intel's Nehalem microarchitecture improves system speed by cutting bottlenecks that plagued Intel's earlier chips. In certain circumstances, the chips could double server performance while consuming less power compared to its predecessors.

The chips' improved energy consumption relative to performance gives users a reason to upgrade, said Dean McCarron, principal analyst at Mercury Research

"The idea of saving power is more pervasive in Nehalem. You're seeing a much more fine-grained level of power control across [switches] on the chip," McCarron said. The current Xserve servers run chips belonging to Intel's earlier Penryn family.

One of the major improvements involves Intel integrating the memory controller on the CPU, which helps processors communicate faster with memory. It removes the memory latency affecting earlier Intel processors, which should translate to better server performance.

Data-intensive applications like video processing frequently require processors to fetch information from memory, and Intel's earlier chips had to go through a bus called the front-side bus (FSB). After years of criticism, Intel removed the FSB and integrated the memory controller into the CPU with Nehalem chips.


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Nehalem also offers a faster pipe for a CPU to communicate with other processors and system components. That helps servers execute more tasks in parallel and tackle larger workloads. The faster communication improvements are bundled under a technology Intel calls QuickPath InterConnect, or QPI.

The chip advancements bode well for Apple's effort to push parallelism through its future Mac OS X server operating system, code-named Snow Leopard Server. The OS is built for a multicore system, and includes Grand Central technologies that will help server software better allocate tasks across multiple cores while saving power.

Details about the server operating system that will ship with these new servers are scarce, but it could possibly have hooks to crank down the clock speed as it executes tasks in parallel, McCarron said. Intel allows reduction in clock speed through the Turbo Mode feature that can crank down chip clock speed to save power.

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