Some are sold purely on the basis of the clear impact flash has on application performance at similar or competing businesses. Others may need comprehensive benchmarking before making a purchase. IBM has created a suite of offerings that help a customer at any stage of the buying process. “Finding the ideal flash storage systems for your environment is just the beginning,” says Jim Surmacewicz, of Armonk, N.Y.-based IBM Corp. “The harder part is figuring out where and how to integrate them in your IT infrastructure for the biggest possible effect.”

Surmacewicz ought to know. He’s business development executive for IBM’s Flash Centers of Competency (CoCs), a global network of state-of-the-art technology labs dedicated to helping organizations determine precisely how solutions based on IBM® FlashSystem™ products will benefit them and how to configure a FlashSystem solution for maximum performance—before they’ve purchased or deployed anything.

“We take the mystery out of flash storage,” Surmacewicz says. “We’ll help you see exactly what to expect up front and exactly how to turn those expectations into reality.”

STAIRWAY TO VALUE

That’s a mission IBM considers so important that it announced its intention to build the Flash CoCs the same day it introduced the FlashSystem product line. “Flash is a transformative technology, and IBM wanted to give customers an opportunity to experience it firsthand,” Surmacewicz notes. “We felt it was critical to establish the Flash Centers of Competency for that purpose.”
Today, IBM operates 12 Flash CoCs in countries around the globe. All of them are designed from the ground up to accommodate the enormously varied needs of current and potential flash storage users.

"Some want to improve response times, while others are consolidating their storage environment, preparing their infrastructure for future growth, or all of the above," observes Bernd Mueller, manager for advanced storage technical skills at IBM’s Flash CoC in Mainz, Germany. Furthermore, he continues, some customers are already familiar with flash storage, while others are completely new to it.

The Flash CoCs, accordingly, have something for everyone. "They provide access to expert knowledge from flash storage specialists and a huge variety of test hardware and software from IBM and other suppliers, all under one roof," Mueller says. The end results for IBM’s flash customers are more informed decision making and faster time-to-value.

Surmacewicz likens the Flash CoCs’ many offerings to a staircase that runs from standardized and simple to customized and complex. Briefings and solution workshops are the first step. “We educate the customer about flash, tell them where we think it fits in the data center, and help them identify the right combination of flash and related systems for their specific needs,” he says.

Customers interested in taking the next step can participate in the Flash CoCs’ interactive demos, which IBM can deliver either in-house at the CoC or remotely via the cloud. “They [interactive demos] give people a feel for how our FlashSystem products work, how to configure them, and how they respond to common enterprise workloads,” Mueller states.

Next up on the staircase are IBM’s proof-of-technology and proof-of-concept engagements. The former provide hands-on lab experience with standard flash configurations. The latter allow visitors to test flash storage on the same infrastructure they use back home. “We can build an evaluation environment for the customer before they arrive that uses the same operating systems, servers, and software they have in their data center, regardless of manufacturer,” Mueller says. Enterprises come away knowing exactly where and how to utilize flash for maximum impact, how to optimize surrounding technologies such as networking and virtualization, and what benefits to expect.

At the top of the Flash CoC staircase are IBM’s ultra-customized benchmark studies. “In these, the customer can bring their exact data and we can duplicate their exact workload,” Mueller says. “They see how our flash solutions perform under conditions very, very specific to their environment.”

PROOF POSITIVE
In addition to those on-site engagements, the Flash CoCs provide a range of off-site services. “With the economy the way it is, we know that some organizations can’t travel to one of our centers,” Surmacewicz notes. In such cases, specialists from IBM’s Systems and Technology Lab Services Group can lead consultative studies at the customer’s location instead. Working closely with the customer’s IT staff, the IBM experts use sophisticated modeling tools to calculate the

“They can show you the accelerated speeds you’ll experience in your business-critical applications as well as the cost savings you’ll realize in areas like power usage, licensing, and floor space consumption.”

—Jim Surmacewicz business development executive for IBM’s Flash Centers of Competency
In a second kind of off-site assessment, IBM consultants use software from Arxscan Inc., of Asbury, N.J., to collect detailed analytics about an enterprise's data center and operating conditions. “Drawing on that information, they can then quickly pinpoint areas in the customer's environment where flash might make sense,” Surmacewicz says.

For organizations investigating flash storage, utilizing the Flash CoCs translates into greater confidence in the ROI a flash solution will provide. “You know exactly what you’re getting in advance, because you can optimize a deployment for your specific requirements and see the advantages with your own eyes before making the acquisition,” Mueller says. That up-front information can make securing budget for a flash investment easier too. “You can prove to the C-suite that flash will deliver real business value,” Mueller notes.

Proof, ultimately, is what the IBM Flash CoCs are all about. Drawing on the expertise and knowledge they provide, IT leaders can verify that flash storage really will deliver the benefits they expect it to. “We can help you directly link a flash rollout to competitive advantage,” Mueller says. “At the end of the day, there are few things a CIO wants more than that.”

For more information, visit ibm.com/storage/flash
IBM’s Flash Centers of Competency are some of the most advanced facilities on earth for evaluating flash storage. In this executive Q&A, IBM’s Jim Surmaczewicz provides an insider’s look at what they do and why they’re so effective at giving CIOs peace of mind in their flash storage investments.

Q: Tell me about the origins of IBM’s Flash Centers of Competency. Why did IBM create them?

A: The Flash Centers of Competency date back to the launch of our Flash Ahead initiative, a strategic effort announced in April 2013 to help enterprises better tackle challenges like big data using flash technology. Specifically, we announced three things that day: our new FlashSystem product line, a $1 billion investment in flash-related research and development, and a commitment to build 12 Flash Centers of Competency around the globe to help our customers test flash solutions and measure the projected performance gains they deliver.

Q: What are some examples of typical customer engagements? What kinds of things do people tend to do and learn?

A: It’s hard to sum up everything customers do at the Flash CoCs, but just to give you a taste I’ll talk about two kinds of engagement, our benchmark studies and our consultative-led assessments.

The benchmark studies happen on-site at one of our Flash CoCs, and they’re the most comprehensive, realistic proof-of-concept tests we do. Customers can bring their actual data and run their exact workload on the exact hardware and software they have in their own data centers. We’ve done a number of these now and customers find them really powerful, because they’re seeing real results for a flash solution in the same environment where they’re going to use it.

Low Risk, High Reward

“People identify the areas in your environment that will benefit most from flash storage and then use cutting-edge modeling techniques to calculate the potential performance improvements and cost savings.”

Seeing those numbers is kind of an “aha” moment for most customers. We had a major research hospital tell us once that our consultative-led assessment made the decision to proceed with a flash solution a no-brainer. When you hear that type of comment you know you’ve done a good job of helping the customer see just how big a difference a FlashSystem deployment can make.

Q: From a CIO’s perspective, what benefits do the IBM Flash Centers of Competency offer?

A: Technology is important for CIOs, but mostly in terms of the competitive advantage it enables. At the Flash CoCs, we can help you measure that in really precise terms. We can show you how many more revenue-generating transactions you’ll do in a day, how much you’ll lower your operational costs, how much you’ll reduce downtime. So we can tie the technology’s performance characteristics directly to business value and competitive advantage.

The other thing that matters to CIOs, of course, is risk, which they obviously want to reduce as much as possible. By helping customers test and configure and measure flash solutions before rollout, the Flash CoCs take the risk out of a FlashSystem deployment. That’s something CIOs really appreciate.