In the era of digital transformation, datacenters play a pivotal role in managing the escalating amounts of data generated. To meet the challenges posed by this data deluge, SSDs have become a vital component in the evolving landscape of data storage.

Delivering Data Storage for the Modern Datacenter with QLC NAND Flash

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Written by: Jeff Janukowicz, Research Vice President, Solid State Drives and Enabling Technologies

Introduction

In an era where the generation of data is growing exponentially, the quest to enhance data storage efficiency within datacenters has led to an exploration of emerging technologies. Among these, quad-level cell (QLC) NAND flash technology has garnered significant attention across the ecosystem. In this IDC Analyst Brief, we investigate the utilization of QLC NAND flash technology to enhance data storage efficiency in datacenters.

QLC NAND flash presents notable advantages such as increased storage density and cost-effectiveness, rendering it an appealing choice for environments dealing with large volumes of data. Given that most of today's modern workloads are read and data intensive, datacenter architects can make better informed decisions for optimizing their storage infrastructure by understanding the benefits as well as the limitations of QLC NAND flash.

AT A GLANCE

KEY TAKEAWAYS

As data continues to surge in the digital era, the quest for efficient and high-capacity data storage solutions has intensified within datacenters. Amid this pursuit, QLC NAND flash technology is on a path to becoming one of the preferred storage technologies for datacenter architects.

As businesses advance their digital transformation journey, there is an evolving set of customer needs:

» **Tightening IT budgets:** Global macroeconomic trends have led to a concerted effort among organizations to optimize expenditures, including IT budgets. The demand for cost-effective yet efficient storage solutions is more pronounced than ever before.

» **Increased IT complexity:** Modern datacenters must contend with a wide range of workloads and a diverse set of IT infrastructure hardware. This complexity demands versatile storage solutions capable of accommodating various types of data and applications seamlessly.

» **Sustainability as a strategic imperative:** Sustainability has transitioned from being an ethical consideration to a strategic imperative. Datacenters are under pressure to minimize their ecological footprint by conserving space, reducing power consumption, minimizing disposal cost, and enhancing cooling efficiency.

The Crucial Role of SSDs in Datacenters

In the modern landscape of data-driven operations, datacenters play a pivotal role in managing the escalating amounts of data generated and powering the digital economy. Today, solid state drives (SSDs) are a vital component in modern datacenters and play a transformative role, even redefining how datacenters operate. Unlike traditional hard disk drives (HDDs), SSDs have no moving parts, leading to significantly faster data access, reduced latency, and enhanced overall system performance. This capability is paramount in meeting the demands of modern datacenter operations, where microseconds can make a monumental difference accessing the data and making vital data-driven decisions. Beyond performance, SSDs also bring adaptability, fitting seamlessly with a wide array of flexible form factors into diverse workloads and infrastructures, simplifying datacenter architectures while paving the way for innovation. In essence, SSDs play a crucial role today and into the future, enabling datacenters to navigate the complexities of the digital age with agility, efficiency, and resilience.

As datacenter architects evaluate storage solutions, the emergence of QLC SSDs brings forth a compelling option. QLC SSDs provide an optimal balance between storage capacity and cost-effectiveness, catering to the requirements of data-intensive operations.

Definition and Characteristics of QLC NAND Flash

QLC NAND flash is a type of nonvolatile memory technology that stores four bits of data per memory cell, distinguishing it from single-level cell (SLC), multi-level cell (MLC), and triple-level cell (TLC) NAND flash. This higher bit density results in increased storage capacity but introduces certain challenges due to the intricacies of managing multiple voltage levels within a single cell.

Brief Comparison with Other NAND Flash Technologies

» **SLC:** Storing one bit per cell, SLC offers high performance and endurance but at a higher cost and lower capacity.

» **MLC:** Storing two bits per cell, MLC balances capacity and performance but is still relatively expensive.

» **TLC:** Storing three bits per cell, TLC provides greater capacity but potentially compromises on endurance.

» **QLC:** Storing four bits per cell, QLC NAND flash significantly increases capacity while presenting a cost-effective option with considerations for managing performance and durability.

Benefits of QLC NAND Flash in Datacenters

As data continues to surge in the digital era, the quest for efficient and high-capacity data storage solutions has intensified within datacenters. Amid this pursuit, QLC NAND flash technology is on a path to becoming one of the preferred storage technologies for datacenter architects. Benefits of this technology include:

» **Cost-effectiveness and higher storage density:** QLC NAND flash's ability to store more bits per cell translates to higher storage capacity within the same physical footprint. This advantage enables datacenters to accommodate the ever-increasing amount of data being generated without exponentially expanding their infrastructure.

» **High capacity for storing large data sets:** Datacenters often grapple with the challenge of managing vast data sets. QLC NAND flash's higher storage capacity enables datacenter operators to consolidate and store more data without compromising on performance.

» **Reduced power consumption and cooling requirements:** Traditional mechanical HDDs can have high power consumption and generate significant heat. As a solid state technology, QLC NAND flash requires significantly less power and generates less heat, contributing to reduced energy costs and enhanced cooling efficiency.

» **Improved read and write performance:** QLC NAND flash offers superior read and write performance compared with conventional HDDs. This advantage translates to faster data access, quicker application responsiveness, and improved overall datacenter efficiency.

The rise of QLC NAND flash ushers in a new era of data storage optimization for architects within the datacenter. With its ability to balance high storage capacity, cost-effectiveness, and improved performance, QLC NAND flash addresses the evolving needs of modern data storage. Datacenters stand to benefit not only from the immediate advantages of this technology but also from the potential to reshape their storage infrastructure to meet the demands of emerging and future data-driven workloads.

Considerations

The adoption of QLC NAND flash technology within datacenters has opened the door to higher capacity and cost-efficient storage solutions. However, it is important that datacenter architects effectively navigate the inherent characteristics of QLC NAND flash with a focus on enhancing both performance and reliability when it comes to the following:

» **Endurance and life span management techniques:** The unique characteristic of QLC NAND flash brings forth a notable challenge — endurance and life span management. The higher bit density comes with a trade-off of total program/erase cycle capability of the NAND reducing the write endurance of the drive. This concern tends to be minimized given the read-intensive nature of many of today's workloads. To mitigate this risk, careful wear-leveling strategies are crucial. Distributing write and erase cycles evenly across memory cells helps extend the SSD's longevity, ensuring data integrity over the drive's life span.

» **Understanding QLC performance characteristics:** QLC NAND flash possesses distinct performance characteristics, especially in write-heavy environments. The challenge here lies in maintaining consistent write speeds and minimizing latency especially when considering sequential versus random performance, as well as small block versus large block performance. Robust garbage collection algorithms and intelligent data management practices are vital to optimize write performance. By efficiently managing the NAND flash media, datacenters can circumvent performance bottlenecks that can otherwise arise in write-intensive scenarios.

» **Error correction and reliability strategies:** With the increasing bit density of QLC NAND flash, the importance of error correction and reliability strategies cannot be overstated. Implementing advanced error correction codes is essential to safeguard the integrity of stored data. Robust algorithms can correct errors that may naturally occur over time, preserving data reliability. In addition, thorough data integrity checks and proactive monitoring are necessary to detect and mitigate potential issues before they escalate.

Understanding and navigating the nuances of QLC NAND flash in datacenters requires some key considerations and an SSD partner to help to unlock the full potential of this technology within datacenter environments.

Best Practices for QLC NAND Flash Deployment in Datacenters

Deploying QLC NAND flash effectively in datacenters requires an adherence to best practices to maximize performance, reliability, and life span. This starts with understanding workload requirements and data access patterns. We are increasingly in a read-dominated world, so datacenter architects should identify which applications and data types are suitable for QLC NAND flash. In addition, when evaluating datacenter infrastructure, QLC SSDs are suitable for various deployments in the datacenter. Here are some examples.

» **Storage arrays:** QLC can be used in all-flash arrays (AFAs) creating a cost-effective storage array to effectively compete with traditional HDDs-based storage arrays. QLC SSDs can be used as a storage tier within storage arrays, especially for applications that prioritize cost-efficiency and high-capacity storage. They can be combined with other types of SSDs or HDDs to create a tiered storage architecture that optimizes performance and cost based on data access patterns.

» **Object storage:** QLC SSDs can be employed in object storage systems where large amounts of unstructured data are stored. Object storage is commonly used for data backup, archival storage, and content distribution. QLC SSDs can provide cost-effective storage for such use cases.

» **Servers:** QLC SSDs can be used in server environments where high-capacity local storage is required. They can serve as a layer for data storage, providing a balance between cost and performance for applications that are more read intensive.

» **Virtualized environments:** QLC SSDs can be utilized in virtualized environments for storing virtual machine images, application data, and virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI) deployments. By deploying QLC SSDs for lower performing write workloads and infrequently accessed data, datacenters can optimize their storage infrastructure costs.

» **Content delivery networks (CDNs):** CDNs often employ SSDs for caching and delivering content efficiently. QLC SSDs can be used within CDN infrastructures as a cost-effective storage option for caching frequently accessed content and improving content delivery performance.

» **Data analytics:** QLC SSDs can be beneficial in data analytics environments where large-scale data processing and analysis take place. They can be used for storing massive data sets, enabling faster data access and analysis in applications such as artificial intelligence (AI), data warehouses, business intelligence systems, and machine learning platforms.

By adhering to these best practices and infrastructure deployments, datacenters can successfully deploy QLC NAND flash, harnessing its cost-effectiveness and capacity benefits while mitigating potential challenges to achieve optimal performance, reliability, and longevity.

Conclusion

In the era of data-driven operations, modern datacenter requirements are changing, and the need to deliver efficient and high-capacity data storage solutions to successfully manage the escalating amounts of data generated is paramount. QLC SSDs are poised to help datacenter architects achieve these goals and are on a path to becoming one of the preferred storage technologies within the datacenter because they provide an optimal balance between storage capacity and cost-effectiveness.

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About the Analyst

Jeff Janukowicz, *Research Vice President, Solid State Drives and Enabling Technologies*

Jeff Janukowicz is a research vice president at IDC, where he provides insight and analysis on the SSD market for the client PC, enterprise datacenter, and cloud market segments. In this role, Jeff provides expert opinion, in-depth market research, and strategic analysis on the dynamics, trends, and opportunities facing the industry. His research includes market forecasts, market share reports, and technology trends of clients, investor, suppliers, and manufacturers.

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IDC Research, Inc.

140 Kendrick Street

Building B

Needham, MA 02494, USA

T 508.872.8200

F 508.935.4015

Twitter @IDC

idc-insights-community.com

www.idc.com

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