
Desktops still have a purpose

Evolution, not revolution

Jon Collins, June 2008

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In a nutshell:

There are lots of ways to deliver computing to the user. The desktop is evolving, but it is not being superseded just yet.

Key points:

- Information workers need a platform to work on. The desktop, in some guise, will live on
- Control and security are two major reasons why the traditional desktop still has life in it.
- IT strategy must be based on business needs and outcomes, not available products.
- User's requirements are not uniform. Here is the scope for change and innovation

Desktop computing is where the rubber hits the road, as far as information technology is concerned. The 30 centimetres between screen and eyeball dictates whether your expensive servers, networking kit, application licences and contracts will deliver the required performance.

For many individuals, personal computing is synonymous with desktop computing, as PC clients, workstations or their thin-client equivalents deliver a standardised set of applications to a familiar user base.

Whether running SAP or a Microsoft Office front end, a computer is - in short - a computer. But there have been a number of advances in related areas, notably in terms of mobile devices and the web - and it is a reasonably safe bet that your organisation will make use of some combination of these technologies.

Desktop computers have never been the most reliable of beasts - we may only now see the blue screen of death on occasion, but we all recognise that it still lurks somewhere under the surface.

Mobile devices, such as PDAs, BlackBerrys and other handheld delights, might end up with the same internal combination of processing and memory as a desktop computer, but their provenance has resulted in some quite specific functions and uses.

Freeform Dynamics research suggests IT leaders believe the most relevant device for remote users is the mobile phone, followed by the laptop. The prominence of the laptop reveals that personal computers often provide the right combination of application functions in the most appropriate form factor.

Handheld devices continue to grow in power and their operating systems are following suit, with the result that a middle category of devices is emerging. Such devices are small enough to be considered portable, but just large enough to work with, as opposed to communicate with.

Ultra-mobile PCs (UMPCs), such as the OQO Model e2 and the Samsung Q1, provide personal computing facilities.

Such devices, however, should not be seen as laptop replacements, but as a second device to be used when a laptop is unavailable. Ultra-large PDAs, such as the HTC Advantage, aim to fill a similar gap.

Other crucial developments are taking place on the web. Our research and anecdotal evidence suggests collaborative, internet-based tools are gradually being accepted into the mainstream.

The second strand of internet-based activity surrounds software as a service (SaaS), a model that encompasses just about every form of web-based application and that appears to be more hype than substance.

All but a few providers have succeeded in emulating Salesforce.com's success. From the corporate standpoint, we see SaaS initiatives wallowing at the bottom of the heap of priorities - right down, in fact, with social networking and Web 2.0.

But there is every reason to believe that web-based applications will eventually be used in some combination with more traditional, desktop-based applications. And here, Microsoft does seem to have the right strategy, especially when the firm talks about "software plus services".

However - and this is a big however - no technology leader is in any hurry to throw away the traditional desktop model in favour of a pure internet-based application suite.

Rather than just being constrained by technical factors, IT directors will need to maintain control - and whatever the state of existing systems and desktops, transferring control to the internet cloud seems too great a risk.

And we, therefore, doubt whether there will be any major transitions in desktop configurations any time soon - we believe changes will be incremental, rather than revolutionary.

Companies such as Citrix and Microsoft's Softricity acquisition illustrate changes in terms of application streaming to the desktop. Such developments will allow users to download enterprise applications on demand.

The impact on software licensing costs could be huge and present a significant challenge to IT suppliers that are attempting to efficiently deliver applications, while preserving revenues. Not all vendors will succeed.

User interfaces present another area for potential change; should users consider voice recognition and immersive graphical environments such as Second Life? Once again, the answer lies in evolution, not revolution. While progress is slow, a number of companies, such as IBM, Cisco and BT, are investing in Second Life.

Any organisation that is about to decide on its IT strategy needs to consider potential business outcomes, rather than available technologies.

No article about the future of the desktop would be complete without a discussion of open source. While Linux can provide a viable desktop operating system, open source has so far failed to penetrate the corporate psyche in all but a couple of high-profile, public sector organisations.

A combination of a lack of interest from hardware manufacturers and poor support of mainstream applications has kept Linux in the domain of the hobbyist.

At the same time, Microsoft has not been idle. Developments such as Windows Mobile 6 highlight how the company has learned the lessons of trying to replicate a standard operating system suitable for handheld devices.

Microsoft's advantage, which it has thus far failed to fully exploit, is the possible joined-up nature of its applications. However, full integration between Windows Mobile, Sharepoint, Exchange and Office has yet to reach the mainstream.

Other developments, particularly Google Apps, the Apple iPhone, mashups and cloud computing, could create significant changes in personal computing habits.

But from a strategy perspective, most individuals will continue to use corporate desktop facilities for the foreseeable future.

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