Desktop Virtualisation
For when users get personal

By Tony Lock, January 2011

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A major factor behind the challenges of desktop management, even after more than two decades, continues to be user resistance to any form of IT management activity around what they think of as their PCs.

And there's the heart of the problem — many users see the PC to be their personal equipment rather than a tool supplied by the business to allow them to work more effectively. IT administrators have struggled for years to exert any form of proactive management of these vital systems, usually with very little success.

This is a treacherous state of affairs, so what options are there to change this for the better?

The one thing that nearly all IT services have in common is that the user accesses them from their desktop, laptop or increasingly a smart phone or mobile tablet device.

But few CIOs have a clear idea of just how much effort, time and money is spent managing PCs and laptops. The addition of new form factors and devices threatens to add not simply another level of complexity to an already difficult task but to increase the resources required to keep users productive.

Organisations need to use management tools far more widely in the daily management of the devices that users rely on every day. In the last five years, management and administrative tools have come on leaps and bounds in their ability to keep users and their systems operational and productive. So why are these tools not being used more widely at a time when user productivity needs to be as high as possible and when the need to secure their devices has never been higher?

The answer is complex, but there are a few key issues that must be recognised.

 - There is huge resistance to having IT manage them proactively in any fashion. This is especially the case in scenarios where users believe that any form of management by IT, except to help repair non-operational machines or to add new functionality and software, will result in the user being constrained or restricted in their ability to modify their machines themselves.

 - More users now wish to work from home, potentially using their own machines to access corporate systems or to bring their personal devices into the business environment. It is quite usual for these requests to be made by very influential business managers, if not by the board level members themselves, people who don't take no for an answer.

Desktop virtualisation holds the potential to allow CIOs and their staff to actively manage desktop, laptop and tablet devices in ways that users might not find to be overly intrusive.

This is especially the case when the solution provides the user with a virtual business machine, running on their device in isolation of the surrounding operating system. This approach offers many security benefits as well as being much more supportable than the current state of affairs.

More importantly, the solution can still allow the user a great deal of flexibility to manipulate the machine outside of the virtual business machine, allowing the them to feel the machine is still theirs to control and manipulate, but still leaving IT managers very firmly in charge of the business capabilities of the virtualised solution.

This approach is attractive on many fronts, because it reduces user downtime whilst significantly reducing those hard to measure support costs that account for large, but invisible, tranches of IT support and operations budgets.

Is desktop virtualisation the answer to life the universe and everything in desktop support? Clearly not. But the potential to improve user productivity, reduce support costs and raise security levels means that virtual desktop solutions should be on the agenda of organisations of all sizes as they look at the refresh of their existing desktop estates in the next year or two.

It will be interesting to note how rapidly the interest that our surveys indicate to be growing steadily amongst many organisations translates into real-world deployments.

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