Rethinking desktop delivery

Time to break out of the Windows upgrade spiral?

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In a nutshell

Many IT professionals are weary of the relentless Windows upgrade spiral and the cost and disruption it brings. Rethinking desktop delivery, however, can both ease the pain and put the business onto a firmer footing for the future.

Oh no, not again

If there's one type of project that's guaranteed to get IT professionals riled up it's a major desktop migration. It's a horribly complex, risky and tedious job, that often delivers little or no new capability to the business. Therefore no one thanks you for all of those evenings and weekends spent testing software and working through compatibility problems. All you get is moaning and whinging from users about things not working the way they did before.

OK, so we have painted a deliberately bleak picture here to make the point, but the truth is that most businesses have been locked into a perpetual desktop upgrade spiral for decades, and as the following comments from a recent Freeform Dynamics research study illustrate, many are starting to question the logic:

> **"Large scale spend and disruption simply to change the version of Windows in use has little business benefit."**

> **"The question asked is why we need to change when the company is already doing OK with what it has."**

Even Microsoft seems to have acknowledged the "Oh no, not again" sentiment created by the prospect of that next major upgrade. It has declared an intention to rollout new functionality on a more ongoing basis in the future. However, those with experience of disruptive 'Service Packs' and 'Patch Tuesday' failures might interpret this as just spreading the pain. And don't hold your breath waiting for all of your Windows 7 desktops to be magically transformed to Windows 8 or 10 through an incremental update process.

Putting off the pain

In the meantime, major desktop migration projects often end up being continuously deferred for a variety of reasons – some to do with the avoidance of cost, risk and hassle, others more directly linked to Microsoft-specific concerns (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Have any of the following been particular issues in relation to desktop / notebook refresh activity?
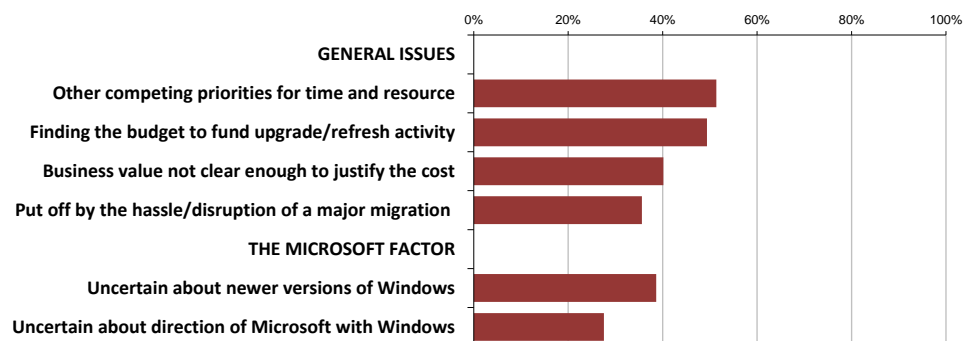
If you let any essential part of your IT infrastructure drift too far out of date it tends to become difficult and costly to manage.

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Of course a consistent infrastructure to deal with growing device diversity would be ideal, but most are a long way from that.

The trouble is, while Windows migrations seldom deliver anything new to business users per se, if you let any essential part of your IT infrastructure drift too far out of date it tends to become difficult and costly to manage, and begins to act as a constraint on progress in dependent areas. The simplest example is software and hardware vendors discontinuing support for older operating systems and equipment.

So what's the answer?

Time to relegate the machine

There's some simple logic we can bring to bear on this problem. If you can't let any essential part of the infrastructure drift too far out of date, and one particular element is proving hard to keep current, then reduce it to non-essential status.

In practical terms, the key is to make desktops virtual. For some types of user, this could translate to total centralisation, with the operating system, applications and data all residing on the server side of the network. This approach is suitable for task-based workers who tend to sit at a desk all day running the same subset of applications.

But desktop virtualisation is not the all-or-nothing approach it used to be. Modern solutions will always centralise management and software delivery, but the operating system and/or applications can still execute locally where required to suit the needs of mobile users. Execution options can even be varied based on the user, the device they are working on, the network they are connecting over, and the specific application they are running, all controlled through centrally managed policies.

An important concept in all this is protecting software from the local environment. At one level this could be through running a totally separate virtual machine on a client-side hypervisor. At a more granular level, individual applications can be run in a sandbox-style container, wrapped in the necessary policies and settings. Either way, the nature of the local hardware and operating system becomes less important.
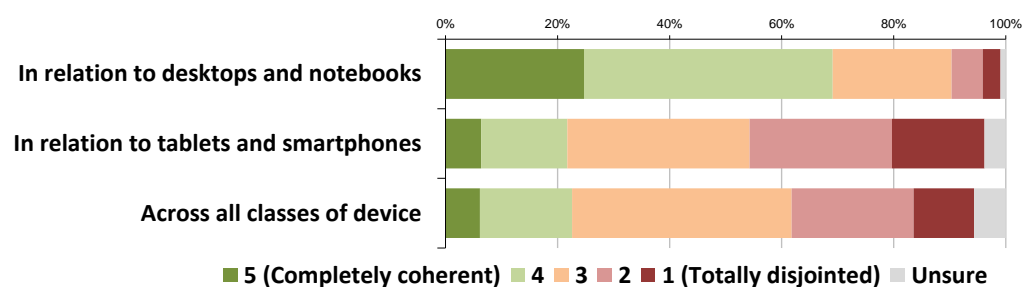
Going further

But virtualisation in relation to desktops and notebooks is only part of the picture. During the abovementioned research more than 90% of participants said they were seeing demand for smartphones and tablets, with over 50% noting a trend towards Windows PC alternatives such as the Apple Mac. Furthermore, around 85% reported the use of multiple devices by individual users.

Of course a consistent infrastructure and approach to deal with growing device diversity would be ideal, but most are a long way from that at the moment (Figure 2).

Figure 2

How joined up is your current environment from an infrastructure perspective (virtualisation, management, security, data protection, etc)?

Legend: ■ 5 (Completely coherent) ■ 4 ■ 3 ■ 2 ■ 1 (Totally disjointed) ■ Unsure

Categories: In relation to desktops and notebooks; In relation to tablets and smartphones; Across all classes of device

Some IT vendors are starting to shape suites of software to help you to develop a more joined up approach

The good news is that some IT vendors are starting to shape suites of software to help you to develop a more joined up approach. The main objective is to pull the threads together across previously separate disciplines such as desktop administration, desktop/application virtualisation, mobile device management and mobile application management. Along the way, software distribution is morphing into self-service app stores, and data management is extending out into so called 'sync and share' solutions.

Specific functionality to one side, however, the most important capability is an ability to implement active policies and delivery mechanisms in a consistent manner across all types of device, with full visibility of all end user computing activity.

Nice theory, but…

During the research, we saw broad buy-in to the aspirations we have been discussing, but the challenges involved in turning nice ideas and theories into action also came through strongly (Figure 3).

Figure 3

How much would you agree or disagree with the following statements?
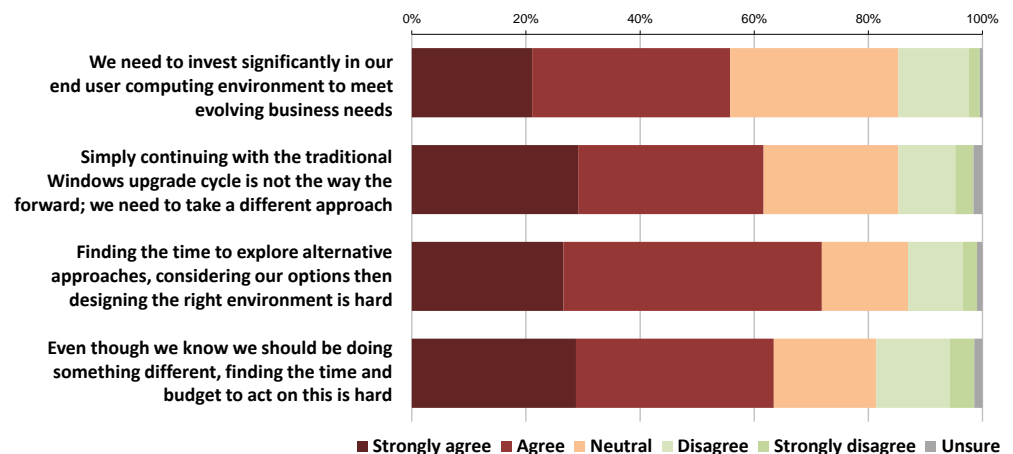
With this in mind, constructing a clear view of what's important to the business is critical, as is performing an honest appraisal of current capability. You can then better formulate an objective business case for investment of the necessary funding, time and resources to get the organisation onto a firmer footing for the future.

Constructing a clear view of what's important to the business is critical.

For more ideas on how to go about this, including how to work through some of the people issues you are bound to encounter along the way, we would encourage you to download the full research report relating to the study we have mentioned. This is entitled "The Politics and Practicalities of End User Computing", and it's available from the Freeform Dynamics website (www.freeformdynamics.com).

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