



Desert Island Desks

Such is the current profile, prevalence, and allure of virtualisation technology, that its extension across the enterprise from datacentre to the desktop was only a matter of time, writes Gareth Kershaw

With virtualisation technologies rapidly gaining both ground and traction across a wide array of IT disciplines – from the consolidation and optimisation of storage and server resources to file and application virtualisation – it was never going to be very long before someone thought of applying the idea to the desktop environment.

Indeed, it represents classic, default IT-industry thinking. If a technology works

in one context, goes the rationale, well then it's bound to work everywhere else.

However, by way of an unexpected but welcome change, it is a theory that may actually hold water where virtualisation is concerned. And all kinds of companies are now looking to extend the myriad financial, logistic, and productivity benefits inherent with other branches of virtualisation out across their desktop infrastructures.

With Desktop Virtualisation models like VDI (Virtualised Desktop Infra-

structure), user desktops are centralised and hosted on a virtual infrastructure in the datacentre and then 'delivered' to their users over the network.

It is not, in essence, a new idea of course. Now however, using the latest technology, it enhances security, simplifies desktop control and management, makes it possible to push a given desktop out to just about any location and, according to Dave Austin, EMEA director of product marketing at Citrix, cuts traditional desktop computing costs by up to 40 per cent.

Ed Speight is Senior Technical Consultant with virtualisation specialist Kelway, which works with primarily city-based clients including Hermes Pension Management and Societe Generale.

Why opt for Desktop Virtualisation, he asks? Because you've spent decades familiarising your users with a Windows desktop environment and you want to protect that investment; to remove fault-prone hardware, to cut costs, and to accelerate and simplify patching and software updates.

Desktop Virtualisation also means desktops can be provisioned or turned off at literally the flick of a switch, adds Michael Allen of Compuware's EMEA IT Service Management Solutions division – allowing easier, centralised management, and ensuring IT staff no longer have to visit individual desks to troubleshoot problems.

Virtualised desktops improve the computing experience for end users too, notes Serguei Belousov, CEO of Parallels.

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Looking to consolidate the number of physical systems it needed to stay "powered up", specialist property lettings agent Leaders implemented a 450-user VMware-based Virtualised Desktop Infrastructure (VDI).

"VDI was the perfect way to simplify the network and reduce costs", explains Leaders IT director Noel Cresswell. "However, with users spread over more than 40 sites, ensuring sufficient bandwidth was problematic."

"Our branch offices became dependent on the applications delivered over the VDI but the underlying Microsoft Services RDP sessions were just too bandwidth intensive for the WAN, which meant staff were waiting 3 or 4 minutes to download images of properties and suffering significant delays in typing emails and accessing details from the database."

Leaders turned to optimisation specialists, Expand Networks to optimise the WAN and compress remote desktop sessions back to the datacentre and "within two minutes of going live" performance had improved "significantly".

"Understanding the impact VDI will have on your network and applications is critical..." says Cresswell. "I'd urge others to consider optimisation before taking the VDI plunge."



Noel Cresswell talks about WAN optimisation

“Virtual Desktop Infrastructure offers end-users the same experience they have on a traditional desktop: the same operating system and applications with which they are already familiar. The difference is that they are now hosted on a central, virtualised server.”

Aside from giving the business greater control of the desktop environment, this helps drive down storage and software licensing costs by running a single

instance of the operating system and its application server-side, rather than one on every desktop, he says.

Such speed and agility also makes Desktop Virtualisation a potentially huge competitive driver, argues Owen Cole, Technical Director for UK&I at F5 Networks.

“Company X sees an opportunity which necessitates setting up a branch office in Manchester. Normally this



would involve employing or relocating staff and then – from the IT point of view – setting up local systems and data recovery to ensure they have the tools they need. Using desktop virtualisation and/or thin-client technology as the interface to the critical applications located at a central datacentre means Company X has a much-reduced ‘go-live’ time for the office to be fully functional.”

Not that Desktop Virtualisation is completely without challenges however.

“(It) is not a complete win-win”, says Cole. “There is a trade-off.”

“Simply put, your employees are at their most productive when the data and applications they need are quickly and easily available. Introducing distance into this equation – i.e. having the application located at a datacentre somewhere in the world vs. on the local PC – can result in sluggish performance. Also, scaling the central servers that hold the critical data and applications can be expensive.”

VDI also adds a layer of complexity to the application delivery chain, warns Allen, and interacts with the network differently than conventional desktops, so the transition to and the ongoing performance of virtual desktops needs to be carefully monitored and managed. Network issues can prevent users from accessing their desktops, directly impacting productivity.

Thanks to limitations in Remote Desktop Protocols (RDPs), neither are virtualised desktops an ideal choice for high-end graphics and multimedia users. And although this is changing fast, it is an object lesson in remembering that different users still have different needs, cautions Belousov.

“One size will not fit all”, he says. “So your VDI solution should allow you to allocate resources where needed such as additional memory for heavy users.”

Deployment costs can be an issue too, says Kamal Patel, Principal Consultant for Microsoft Solutions at Dimension Data. “While the ongoing operational costs of a VDI platform may be lower, the capital cost of implementing VDI is significantly higher. This is something that’s difficult for customers to justify, especially in the current economic climate, as it increases the return-on-investment timeframe.”

As such, caveats Brett Loveday, Technical Director at Thintech, a 12-year veteran of the desktop virtualisation space, it’s essential to remember that virtualising the desktop is neither an out of the box solution, nor a fait accompli. It should not, therefore, be done lightly or without careful thought and planning.

“Overall, it’s important to think about Desktop Virtualisation in the context of a wider, broadly inclusive virtualisation strategy. Any business thinking seriously about virtualising its desktop infrastructure should, for example, give careful consideration to virtualising its applications to at least some degree too.

“It’s also easy to get locked in to the wrong desktop virtualisation package – all be it inadvertently – if you haven’t fully considered or scoped your need. The non-savvy organisation can too soon find itself with an expensive, high-quality big-name solution that, nevertheless, fails to meet the business requirement.”