

I D C E X E C U T I V E B R I E F

How Can a Fresh Approach to the Desktop Contain Costs and Increase Security?

April 2009

Sponsored by Computacenter and Sun Microsystems

Introduction

This Executive Brief summarises issues, ideas and perceptions discussed in a debate held in London on new approaches to desktop computing, particular desktop virtualisation. 33 senior executives from large and midsized organisations attended the debate, which was held on March 4.

The aim of this paper is to provide the most comprehensive account of the discussion, and suggestions for organisations to explore. The document concludes with some recommendations from the participants.

Highlights

The critical issues discussed included:

- The importance of virtualisation. The group felt that change to the desktop was inevitable and would follow the pattern seen in the datacenter and on the server. Organisations should plan for virtualisation and look at proof of concept and how to introduce the technology.
- Managing investment and preserving cash. The group felt that the desktop as it is currently managed is a relatively high cost and difficult to manage part of infrastructure, the benefits of which are hard to determine. However, participants recognised that a wholesale change of approach would be difficult if it involved a significant cash outlay. Therefore, there is a need for incremental change with a strong focus on ROI.
- Preserving creativity while maintaining data integrity. For many organisations the desktop could have significant benefits to their companies through exploiting services such as social media. This benefit has to be weighed against the risks inherent in giving access to a wide range of services. The group felt that a new approach to the desktop would need to offer opportunities to get better visibility into service use.

- Security and business continuity continue to be the main concerns of running an IT environment. There were opportunities to improve both security and continuity by changing the way in which desktops are managed. In particular, data security and access to services could be better controlled. There should be an opportunity to improve business continuity through the ability to provision desktops remotely. Using virtualisation, this could also be done at lower cost compared to traditional remote desktop standby solutions.
- Supporting secure, mobile and flexible working. Virtualisation was seen as a technology that can securely support remote working and support reconfiguration of the desktop to allow flexibility.
- How much of the desktop environment can and should be virtualised? Is the entire desktop estate suitable for virtualisation and if so how should such a project be managed, is it a case of all or nothing? The group felt that virtualisation projects would generate maximum benefit if they were across the desktop estate, but that is a more difficult internal sale than an incremental implementation.

Discussion Format

The debate ranged over three separate but related topics:

- Why should organisations reconsider their desktop investments and management processes?
- How do you go about changing desktop infrastructure? Which applications are suitable for change and which are harder to move to a virtualised infrastructure?
- Does a change in the desktop (combined with change already seen on the server) show the way forward for a new type of computing?

Drivers for Change in the Desktop

In the current economic climate, businesses are faced with increased pressures on IT spending as well as having to maximise operational efficiency. Senior executives raised several issues on how this affected the running of their organisations' IT estates. Having already virtualised much of their server and storage estates, delegates were exploring the virtual desktop option to understand how the following factors would be affected:

- **Security.** Top of the issues discussed is security and improving this through a virtual desktop solution. Virtual desktops benefit from being isolated from their host environments as well as managed centrally, thereby enabling administrators to control user access and data security. An isolated host environment also hedges the risk of infecting corporate applications and data with viruses and malware.
- **Flexibility.** The cost of deploying and supporting PCs becomes very high across offices and countries. As the mobile workforce increases, this again increases the issues surrounding deployment and support. Managing the virtual desktop centrally enables IT to roll out new users and new and upgraded applications quickly and remotely.

In the current economic climate, senior executives recognised an increase in M&A activity, and the need to integrate users quickly could be resolved in a virtual desktop environment.

- **Business continuity and employee productivity.** Embracing a mobile workforce will help optimise employee productivity and can improve the business continuity strategy. An example mentioned is that with virtual desktops, employees would still be able access their work environment even if they couldn't access resources. A second benefit is that organisations don't need a high-cost replicated site to failover desktop services.
- **Total cost of ownership.** The TCO for an individual desktop varies significantly. These costs include hardware, maintenance, helpdesk support, and software updates as well as any user downtime. These costs can all rack up in a traditional desktop environment and often are not well understood. Virtualisation and improved management will help to get a better understanding of these costs.
- **Operational savings.** Being able to remotely manage application deployments that often require a desk-side visit, such as patching and file restores, results in a reduction in staff required to support helpdesk requests, or the reallocation of IT staff to other projects.

As well as reducing the cost of management, using thin client technology for virtual desktops can extend hardware life and reduce spend on power.

- **Sustainable ICT.** In addition to the possible energy savings that can be achieved through thin client technology, desktop virtualisation and enabling home working can all contribute to a reduction in CO₂ emissions, allowing organisations to build on their green credentials.

The drivers presented in the discussions provide a strong argument for enterprises to examine the various desktop virtualisation models. Virtualising the desktop provides most obviously the benefits of centralised computing while allowing greater flexibility around client architecture, but there are a number of challenges that are examined in the following section.

Challenges in Moving to a Virtual Desktop

- **Categorising user and application requirements.** Senior executives repeatedly commented on the suitability of the virtual desktop for every user. How much of the organisation's desktop infrastructure could be virtualised? Is the virtual desktop an "all or nothing" approach?

Profiling users and their requirements for access is important, as not all user groups are suitable for desktop virtualisation. For example, CPU intensive applications such as CAD or bespoke applications may not perform as well on a virtualised desktop platform as on a dedicated system.

- **Cultural change.** The introduction of virtual desktops requires a change in employee thinking from owning a hardware resource to using a service. The IT organisation needs to educate users about the benefits of this change.
- **Building the business case.** As several speakers noted, a reduction in IT spending year on year has often been promised but rarely achieved. Relying on the bottom line alone will not secure funding; instead, senior executives have to gain acceptance for the value provided by the increase in ICT functionality. The group also felt that savings may be achieved through desktop virtualisation, but not recognised in the IT budget, such as a reduction in power usage.

Most senior executives expect IT expenditure to either remain at the same level year on year, or to increase, but in doing so, "IT provides exponentially more" in functionality.

- **Licensing.** Licensing is a headache for most delegates' IT departments, particularly for those looking to understand OS on the virtual desktop. OS licensing rules can be confusing and difficult to adhere to. Senior execs are looking towards suppliers and vendors to provide guidance on virtual desktop licenses.

There is considerable work to be done to help organisations argue the "softer" business case for the investment required to transition to a virtual desktop environment.

Conclusion

IDC believes that desktop virtualisation will impact the traditional computing model, especially as security and business continuity continue to be key concerns in running the IT environment. Companies considering the virtual desktop route will need to fully assess the risks associated with a change in the IT environment. The benefits of transitioning to this environment are numerous, but so are the uncertainties:

- What are the costs of entry to thin client computing versus cost of exiting the fat client world?
- What are the costs associated with not making the change? As users require greater functionality and mobility, what are the costs associated with supporting and maintaining the traditional desktop?

Organisations will need to assess the different types of virtual desktop technologies currently available to find one that is most suitable for their purposes.

For some organisations, the adoption of the virtual desktop may require a complete rethink of the existing client infrastructure. IDC recommends that organisations engage and build relationships with vendors and service providers that are able to provide the knowledge and guidance to tackle virtual desktop deployment.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

The analyst opinion, analysis, and research results presented in this IDC Executive Brief are drawn directly from the more detailed studies published in IDC Continuous Intelligence Services. Any IDC information that is to be used in advertising, press releases, or promotional materials requires prior written approval from IDC. Contact IDC Go-to-Market Services at gms@idc.com or call +44 (0) 20 8987 7198 to request permission to quote or source IDC or for more information on IDC Executive Briefs. Visit www.idc.com to learn more about IDC subscription and consulting services or www.idc.com/gms to learn more about IDC Go-to-Market Services.

Copyright 2009 IDC. Reproduction is forbidden unless authorized.