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At the Center of Desktop Management

Businesses are turning to desktop virtualization to lower costs, ease management and improve security.

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Photo: Craig Kohlruss

Bill Wynne of Valley Yellow Pages enjoys the simplified management that virtual desktop deployment brings his organization.

When PCs malfunction and employees can't do their jobs, business suffers. Multiply that by a factor of 10 or 100 and companies really feel the pain, in both time and stress — and in their bank accounts.

That was the situation faced by Valley Yellow Pages, the largest independent directory publisher in Northern California and third-largest independent publisher in the nation. The Fresno-based company relies on advertising sales generated by staff in 16 sales offices in the central and northern reaches of the state. A host of applications, including ad creation software, daily reports and account requests, are critical to their productivity.

For years, the offices relied on two PCs for each sales team, which generally consisted of a district sales manager and six to 10 account executives (with anywhere from one to six teams per sales office). All PCs were networked to the corporate office through a T1 line from each sales office.

With that setup, one little glitch could bring a sales office's productivity to a standstill.

"Even something like an operating system patch could take the PCs out of commission, and the salespeople were getting very frustrated," says Bill Wynne, Valley Yellow Pages' technical support supervisor.

Those frustrations, plus spiraling management costs, security and scalability concerns, led the company to move to a desktop virtualization solution, in which management is centralized, e-mail is instant and access to a machine is never hindered.

Currently, **64 percent** of companies deploy some form of desktop virtualization, a dramatic shift from last year's 10 percent.
SOURCE: Yankee Group, 2009

The solution for Valley Yellow Pages was to outfit each account executive with an NComputing L100 series virtual desktop. All of the virtual desktops connect to the district sales manager's PC, which houses the applications.

Valley Yellow Pages' decision to move to a virtualized desktop environment makes good sense, says Phil Hochmuth, senior analyst for network infrastructure and security at Yankee Group, a technology research and consulting firm in Boston. Not only does it simplify management and administration, but it saves money, increases security and improves scalability — benefits that any small and midsize business can appreciate.

Simplified management and administration is one of the main reasons SMBs turn to desktop virtualization. "When you have a virtual desktop infrastructure, you centralize the operating system and applications and are streaming it out to users, so you have more control over what's patched and when, and what applications are on the desktop," Hochmuth explains. "And a lot of these VDI suites allow you to override changes an end user might make that could make a system insecure or unstable."

Simplified management was an overriding consideration for Valley Yellow Pages. "If there is a patch or upgrade needed, we only have to do it to the host PC instead of having to do it separately to each PC in a sales office," Wynne says.

Reducing the administrative burden is one of the main reasons why systems administrator Jeff Johnson is considering a move to desktop virtualization. As sole IT support for the 50-employee Pegasus TransTech Corp., a Tampa, Fla., company that provides business solutions to the trucking industry, Johnson has been using VMware's ESX Server as the basis for the company's server virtualization infrastructure for about three years. It's worked so well that Johnson has decided to give desktop virtualization a try by purchasing a VMware license for 10 machines.

"We're looking for higher availability, ease of management, a more sensible approach to disaster recovery, and obvious cost and space savings, and we've found that using VMware's bundle of tools gives us a level of flexibility and visibility you don't have with physical machines," he says. "We have yet to deploy our first virtual desktop, but it's not hard to envision the benefits and ROI that would result from it."

Saving Money

Another major driver is cost savings. In addition to freeing up IT staff to pursue more strategic projects, desktop virtualization reduces the downtime that can result from inoperable PCs and also reduces the power consumption and amount of office real estate taken up by multiple bulky machines. And the bottom line: Thin clients are simply less expensive than fully functional PCs.

For Synernet, a Portland, Maine, provider of health-care transcription, credentialing and other health-related services, moving to a system of virtualized desktops has reduced costs significantly.

"Our biggest cost savings has been in the man-hours saved by not having to troubleshoot the PC problems of 130 medical transcriptionists working on PCs in their homes," says Synernet Vice President Jeff Laniewski.

Today, the company's home-based medical transcriptionists are assigned HP Compaq t5720 or t5730 thin clients, which are connected to a series of Citrix XenServers via the Citrix Access Gateway at company headquarters. The transcriptionists access the Synernet system via the Internet, which creates an encrypted link that allows them to access their applications.

Before the switch, medical transcriptionists used their own PCs, creating a never-ending stream of trouble calls at all hours of the day and night for the company's IT department. And because the company's transcription business is growing at about 27 percent per year, the old system was untenable, Laniewski says. With desktop virtualization, "our trouble-call volume is down at least 90 percent," he says.

Privacy and security were of paramount importance in Laniewski's decision to switch Synernet to desktop virtualization, because companies that work with health-related data must meet the stringent security requirements of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

"We wanted to make sure the security with our remote staff was as ironclad as possible," Laniewski says. "By making sure all staff are deployed on a single platform, security is easier to manage. Most important, the thin clients don't have hard drives, so if the transcriptionist were to download a virus, for example, it would be erased when the thin client shuts down."

BizTech Quick Poll

Which factor would most likely persuade your company to consider desktop virtualization?

39% Cost savings

30% Efficiency
20% Other
8% Scalability
3% Staying current with technology

SOURCE: CDW poll of 446 BizTech readers

Four Aspects of VDI That Might Surprise You

Using a printer with desktop virtualization is doable, but takes some effort: Getting your VDI solution to function with a USB or network printer is complicated because the virtual desktop is really just a window into what's happening on another computer in the data center.

Virtualization works well for high input/output applications: Years ago that wasn't the case, but it's not an obstacle today. For example, VMware has demonstrated a version of ESX Server running more than 100,000 I/O operations per second on one ESX host.

Virtualization isn't new: Sure, it's more mature and more usable today, but the concept is decades old. IBM first used virtualization as a way to partition mainframe computers into separate virtual machines so they could multitask.

You can't virtualize every PC in your organization: You might want to, from a cost and management perspective, but higher-end machines and users with unique requirements may not fit into the mix. Experts say virtualizing about 80 percent is a good target.

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