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Virtual desktops: User tips from the trenches

Virtual desktops offer benefits, but it can be tricky technology, veterans say.

By *Tim Greene*, Network World
October 18, 2012 03:51 PM ET

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MacKenzie says it's important as organizations deploy VDI to certify in-house expertise so routine problems can be handled quickly and economically.

Sydney Adventist is expanding to a new building that will host a teaching facility that will be used by two different organizations, so classrooms will have dual use. That seems like a perfect use of VDI, but because it is an educational setting, Hoang and MacKenzie expect it will pose unique problems so they are seeking advice from that community.

Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Okla., started off its VMware deployment with 300 desktops in student computer labs using non-persistent Windows 7 images on Dell FX 100 zero clients with a back end of Dell servers and EqualLogic storage, says Ron Lee, senior systems engineer at the school.

About 30 or so staffers use persistent desktops as their primary work platform, he says. Another 40 or so access persistent VDI images from university-owned iPads as secondary computers. One faculty member tried to use VDI with the iPad to reach her Windows 7 desktop but found it impractical without a mouse and keyboard and with the small screen. But she found it worked well for accessing data on the go.

He says it's important to fit the endpoint hardware to its use in order to get top performance. The school is looking at Wyse (bought by Dell) P25 zero clients because they support PC-over-IP protocol and are loaded with more RAM for client-side caching to improve application responsiveness.

He steers clear of Z50D thin client appliances because the thin client represented another layer that requires management.

Ultimately the school plans to go to 1,200 virtual desktops over the next three years - but not for everybody. Beyond computer labs, students probably won't get virtual desktops. But they can use the VMware View client on their own devices such as iPads to access generic virtual desktops from off campus. Depending on the version of View, they get the client either from a connection server at the university or at Android or Apple stores for free, he says.

He says VDI is costly but can eventually pay for itself. The school used a private grant to upgrade its Cisco/Enterasys network in preparation of deploying VDI and then to fund the virtualization software itself. While he wouldn't say the cost, he says that at the end of eight years the school will spend half what it would have had it not transitioned to VDI with the break-even point coming sometime in the fourth year.
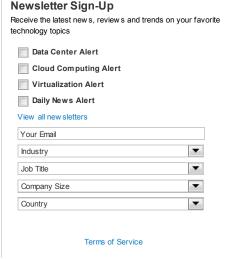
He has several recommendations. Phase in the deployments with the simplest ones first, Lee says, because there is a learning curve.

Squeeze useful information out of the virtual infrastructure with third-party tools. For instance, he uses Xangati performance management software to get better views of virtualization metrics. Xangati gives real-time readouts of processor load on VDI server hosts, something that was available in VMware's Vcenter but without a convenient way to view it.

Be wary of creating too many virtual desktop gold images because they create more work. The more images there are, the more updates have to be applied. He recommends figuring out how to create a common-denominator base image that fits the largest number of end users. To keep down the number of images, he deems it unsuitable to use VDI everywhere.

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