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DISTANCE NO OBJECT

ALAN MONAHAN EXPLAINS WHY MORE SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED BUSINESSES ARE ATTRACTED BY SERVER-BASED COMPUTING

Server-based computing (SBC) – the central deployment on a server of enterprise applications – has traditionally been of interest only to large corporations. Recently, however, as Microsoft has developed its Terminal Services, this architecture has become more interesting and more affordable for small and medium-sized companies.

With Windows Server 2003, company computers can access centrally deployed applications even across low bandwidth connections. Using the Windows RDP protocol, only display information, keyboard entries and mouse clicks are sent across the line. Yet, as far as the end user is concerned, it is no different to working at a desktop PC.

Following the introduction of Service Pack 1, Microsoft Terminal Services also provides security by applying SSL encryption widely used for online banking, while configuration of a firewall protects against external attacks.

The main advantage of Microsoft Terminal Services for small and medium-sized businesses is that it drastically reduces the

cost of administration and support since all administration is managed centrally. New applications, updates or drivers only have to be installed on the server once, putting an end to so-called 'gumshoe administration', where administrators race from one site to another. It also reduces the need for long, technical phone calls with non-technical laypeople.

For workforce productivity, the most significant feature of Microsoft Terminal Services is access to information for all staff not just those on the internal network. Employees working from home or remotely with a laptop can access information and applications just as if they were in the office.

An additional benefit of server-based computing is cheaper hardware. Since the computing power is on the server side, client workstations can be older, lower performance computers. In many cases, thin clients can be used. These are generally less expensive than PCs, are easier to maintain, have a longer life expectancy, consume less energy and make less noise. Moreover, thin clients improve security because they have no writable memory and so are immune to virus attacks and cannot be loaded with infected programs.

Server-based computing is particularly suited to companies that want to connect diverse branches, home users or mobile staff; frequently update data and applications; want to unify various IT infrastructures and overcome diversification of applications; have multiple users sharing a single workstation; want to reduce overhead of administration and support; and want to get rid of obsolete software versions.

When planning the use of Microsoft Terminal Services, particular attention should be paid to printing, as in SBC environments printing is no longer performed locally but across the network. During print processing, a simple list

can quickly become a 1 MB print file, which then has to be sent internally across network connections or externally across ISDN lines. Even worse are PDF or PowerPoint files.

The risk, especially when connecting remote offices, home users, and mobile staff, is that printing monopolises bandwidth capacity and that server resources become heavily loaded during print data rendering. On top of this, every single printer driver, including those for employees' home printers, has to be installed on the server. As a result, printer driver conflicts and blue screens are bound to happen.

Fortunately, there are third party solutions that address this weakness. For example, ThinPrint, a software developer specialising in centralised architectures, has a solution specifically designed for SMEs. Its Remote Desktop Suite Standard is a complete package for setting up a server-based environment under Windows 2003, including a print solution that eliminates printer driver conflicts and overcomes bandwidth issues using an advanced method of compression.

The SBC network is set up by a wizard that makes it possible to turn a Windows 2003 Server into a secure remote desktop environment within minutes. The system automatically creates an individual installation package (msi) for workstation computers or notebooks, instantly giving remote access to a dispersed workforce and enabling them to use their own printers.

Finally, businesses can rest assured that their investment is secure. Microsoft recently committed itself to Terminal Services and announced further improvements for the new operating system generation, Longhorn, ensuring that Microsoft Terminal Services continues to be a powerful tool for centralising medium-sized IT structures.

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WITH MICROSOFT TERMINAL SERVICES APPLICATIONS CAN BE DEPLOYED CENTRALLY

