



ANALYSIS

The virtual reality of VDI

Interest in virtual desktops has never been higher, but too many projects are failing to get the green light. **Caroline Donnelly** reports

Desktop virtualisation has been repeatedly tipped for take-off by vendors, distributors and analysts for the past several years. But, for some VARs, it is proving a difficult nut to crack.

CRN has heard numerous reports of desktop projects stalling at the proof-of-concept stage, despite growing end-user interest in the technology.

In fact, Kevin Bland, channel sales director for UK, Ireland and South Africa at virtualisation giant Citrix, said demand for virtual desktop infrastructures (VDI) has never been higher.

"The technology has been around for a few years, and we have more proof-of-concepts being undertaken now than at any time in our history," he said.

David Angwin, director of marketing for EMEA at thin-client vendor Wyse, said his firm has seen a steep rise in the number of virtual desktop pilots over the past 18 months.

One of the reasons for this is the looming demise of Windows XP, which is set to enter end of life in 2014 — a fact that has prompted many firms to re-think how they provide desktop services to their staff.

"Companies having to downsize, move premises or cater for a sudden influx of new staff because of mergers and acquisitions are also fuelling the demand for VDI," he added.

Growing demand

So, if the demand is there, why are so many VARs struggling to get desktop virtualisation projects off the ground?

Bland said part of the problem lies with how VARs tackle the early stages of these projects: "If you want a proof-of-concept to be successful, the opportunity needs to be qualified properly during the consulting stage to make sure the VAR has lined up the right technology for every group of desktop users in the company."

Sometimes this does not happen because the term desktop virtualisation is a coverall for a broad spectrum of technologies.

"If you have a company with 1,000 employees and



500 of them work in a call centre, where they are doing repetitive work involving the heavy use of two or three applications, they might need a different solution compared with people working elsewhere on a different set of tasks," said Bland.

"It is vital that you have the right solution in place for each type of user in the workplace."

This is a view backed by Angwin, who said badly planned projects are often shelved because the end user experience is so bad.

"When a customer goes down the VDI route, they expect the user experience to be better than what they were previously getting from their old hardware and that does not always happen," he said.

"The technology is absolutely there to deliver this, but I think some resellers have a low expectation of what can be achieved, based on the technology that was available five or so years ago, but customers are unwilling to make do."

Grant Tiller, senior product manager at user virtualisation vendor RES Software, claims to have seen several proofs-of-concept abandoned because of disappointing end user feedback.

"If you have been using Windows XP for a number of years, during that time you would have customised it so that it works the way you want it to," he said. "With VDI that is not easy to achieve, because every user needs to fit a standard template and that can put people off."

Sometimes projects fail because VARs simply do not have the skills needed to successfully tackle a desktop →



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Kevin Bland, Citrix



deployment, added Robin Tapp, chief executive of VDI VAR Molten Technologies.

"Virtualisation technology has been around for more than a decade, but the number of people with the skills needed to successfully do this kind of work is still quite small," said Tapp.

"VARs who made a success of taking on server virtualisation work can come unstuck when they try their hand at the desktop because it requires a different set of skills."

Citrix's Bland said vendors have an important role to play in making sure their partners have the skills needed to progress projects beyond the proof-of-concept stage. "There are a lot of complexities that need to be considered regarding the desktop, and if the channel needs to be educated on that, it is something vendors need to do," he said.

Investment caution

However, Oren Taylor, director of virtualisation-focused distributor CDG UK, said VARs also need to shoulder some of the burden themselves.

"It is a chicken-and-egg scenario, because resellers are very cautious about investing in new technologies and skills and want a guarantee that a market is going to take off before they invest," said Taylor. "But it is difficult for a market to take off unless a few more are willing to back it."

Even so, Taylor said there are a few niche VARs out there that are doing well at desktop virtualisation, because they have invested in recruiting the right staff and good technology.



"I think the channel is still behind the curve on how to solve the root causes of some of the problems with VDI deployments," he added. "Storage is often a project killer, for example, with some thinking they can put in any old storage and the [VDI] product will just work."

David Cumberworth, vice president of sales for Northern Europe at virtual desktop software vendor Atlantis Computing, said storage costs have also been a hurdle in the past.

"Projects at the SMB and mid-market have stalled over the past couple of years because storage requirements were always far too expensive to make projects tenable," he said. "This is no longer the case, [but] channel partners still need to think about how they can prove [to] end users that virtualised solutions can be cheaper than sticking with physical IT, in terms of upfront costs and long-term management expenses."