

Terminal Services - real life reflections by a Cambridge accountancy practice

Reasons for considering terminal services

- The main driver for considering terminal services was the ability to provide a common operating platform and suite of applications to an expanding number of professional staff
- Underlying this desire for commonality was a growing concern over version control for various applications across the existing array of local area networked PCs, combined with the significant and growing time and cost demands both internally and externally of supporting such an environment
- Our practice had grown from 5 to 13 staff over a period of about 6 years and the resources demanded by our IT systems were in need of a serious rethink
- We had recently appointed CNS as our external IT consultants and support resource, on recommendation from a fellow practitioner, and they had successfully upgraded our file server one year previously

Advice obtained from CNS and others

- We were assured by all IT consultants who we spoke to that terminal services would immediately address our main concern over commonality, and would bring with it significant cost savings (both hardware and support costs) over an equivalent life cycle of networked PCs
- We obtained various quotes for the required hardware, software and implementation. One consultant advised that we needed to install Citrix software at an initial cost of about £5,000 in addition to the hardware and operating software costs. CNS advised that Citrix was not required for an efficient terminal services environment - to this day that remains the case
- We also spoke to other accountancy practices and clients who were either already terminal services users, or looking to make the transition in the near future - without exception they said that this was definitely the way ahead for a relatively small enterprise such as ours

Implementation of terminal services

- CNS advised a phased implementation of terminal services, which we commenced in October 2003 with just 3 terminals running alongside 10 networked PCs
- This was a successful arrangement however it soon became clear that terminal users were more satisfied than their PC colleagues, so we accelerated the replacement of PCs with terminals
- Apart from the odd hiccup with some applications, which in fairness tends to be application specific as we have experienced since on more than one occasion, the migration of applications to the new terminal server was smooth and problem-free. This is mainly because CNS took the time to talk to all of our application software suppliers about the technical aspects of running their programs in a terminal services environment
- We were impressed immediately - from day one we experienced faster operation which, together with the time/cost savings when applying software updates, proved that we had taken the right decision

The experience so far - 5 years on

- We have recently replaced the original terminal server, which lasted the expected 5 year term to October 2008.
- Our headcount has increased to 21 and the applications we use continue to be ever more demanding of the server - consequently the replacement server was specified with a far greater capacity of both hard disk space and RAM than the original (but together with CNS installation charges and manufacturer cash back deals, we paid only 10% more than 5 years ago!)
- Our continued faithfulness to the terminal services environment is testament to its success within our business - and is just as much testament to the continued support and advice we receive from CNS
- There have been niggles but these have been few - as alluded to earlier, there are certain applications that will not co-exist happily with others on the same server. The solution has been to run these applications locally on a small number of PCs, with those PCs doubling as terminals for the majority of applications their users require
- Printer settings are another quirky area, especially so where a PC is doubling as a terminal. However we have recently migrated all of our accounts and audit services to a paperless version of our existing software, and in time we aim to do the same with our tax and other services - thus reducing the need for printers and associated consumables

Replacement/upgrade of hardware

- The terminal server costs have been as originally budgeted over the five year term, as discussed above
- The terminal costs have probably not shown quite the saving over PCs that were originally envisaged, due to a combination of some early terminal failures and falling PC prices. However, more recent terminals from Hewlett Packard appear to be more reliable than the earlier Wyse models - and remember this was not a key driver to our original decision to change environment
- Overall, hardware costs have been acceptable - the real bonus is that terminals have such a simple operating system that the support burden often experienced with PCs is just not a consideration for terminal services

Financial impacts/benefits

- There is a quantifiable upfront investment required to make the transition from networked PCs to terminal services in terms of the terminal server itself, in our case approximately £3,000
- The replacement of PCs with terminals can be phased to ease the financial impact, with PCs doubling as terminals quite successfully
- The major financial benefit for us has been twofold - far less time spent applying software updates (this is now a one-time task on the terminal server rather than across a varied fleet of PCs). Secondly, far less downtime and support cost (previous PC problems were frequent and often costly, whereas terminals are generally fault-free and can be replaced for a few hundred pounds)

Conclusions

- If you are a small business with over 10 staff and your business processes involve a variety of IT applications, you should definitely be considering a terminal services environment
- Your operating platform and application updates will be streamlined, resulting in less downtime for users and less IT overhead
- CNS have a proven track record of implementing and supporting terminal services

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