The day of the virtual desktop has come...and gone

Lori MacVittie, 2008-24-09

Desktop virtualization. Virtual desktops. Application streaming. Whatever you want to call it makes no nevermind to me because the problem driving the entire concept is gone. Eradicated. Made irrelevant by the cloud. Made irrelevant by cloudware, SaaS (Software as a Service), and the ubiquitous browser.

I cannot count the number of times I've heard complaints about some form of desktop virtualization/application streaming in the past. It's slow. The server died in the middle of my exam. It's slow. There are no more licenses left. It's slow today (why do you add "today", it's slow every day!). Sensing a theme?

With virtualization in general all the rage right now, it's easy to get people excited over the concept of virtualizing their desktop. The question is, why would someone want to do such a thing to their desktop and to themselves? Are they some kind of masochist? Do they hate themselves? Do they want to be less productive? Do they need an excuse to take a coffee break while Microsoft Word loads from the network, obfuscated by layers of virtualization and licensing, slowed to a crawl by unnecessary technology?

Virtualization in the data center makes sense. It's about consolidation and efficiency. But there's nothing efficient about desktop virtualization or application streaming and in an age where browser-based applications are as rich and robust as their fat desktop-residing predecessors it just doesn't make any sense to clutter up the data center with an extra layer of application infrastructure that needs to be licensed, managed, maintained, patched, and upgraded.

Desktop virtualization never really made much sense to me, but now it *really* doesn't make any sense. The number of cloudware alternatives to traditional fat desktop applications is constantly growing and provide more than adequate functionality for the majority of business folks. For the privacy and security sensitive, locally hosted web-based alternatives to other constant companions like Outlook (Outlook Web Access, anyone?) have long been available to address the issue of desktop maintenance and management, and its rare to find an enterprise application today that *isn't* web-based, or at least web-enabled.

We're willing to run our entire businesses from a mobile device like an iPhone or a BlackBerry but for some reason we're still clinging to the notion that we need fat desktop apps when we're in the office. Balderdash, I say. Poppycock.

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Desktop virtualization had it's day. It was August 10, 2006.

It came and went and, well, no one really noticed, did they? That's because streaming applications from the server, whether via streaming or virtualization technology, has been almost universally despised by users for its poor performance and penchant for crashing at the most inopportune times.

In a world where nearly every business application necessary is webified and either accessible locally or "in the cloud" via a browser or mobile device, desktop virtualization is an anomaly; an archaic throwback to big iron, punch cards, and TN3270 terminals.

But Lori, doesn't F5 do things to make desktop virtualization usable?

Of course we do. We optimize the heck out of this kind of stuff.

So, um, shouldn't you be more positive about it then?

Well, I could try. I could say that if you really want to do this crazy thing then you're going to need to invest in a strong application delivery infrastructure that can optimize and accelerate the delivery of virtual desktops to users, especially if they're remote. But I'd rather you didn't do the virtual desktop thing in the first place. Kind of like how your mom has a band-aid ready for you after you try to jump your bike across that homemade ramp and take a bad spill. She'd rather you didn't do it in the first place, but she'll still help you deal with the consequences when you go ahead and do it anyway. Just because *we* can, doesn't mean *you* should.

Look, there are a lot of benefits to virtualization in the data center, and we're working on all sorts of cool solutions with Microsoft and VMWare to help optimize and automate the delivery of virtualized applications. I can get behind that because it makes sense. But desktop virtualization? It's just never made any sense to me, and it makes even less sense now that the web has finally caught up with the desktop in terms of functionality of its applications.