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Migratory patterns



Migrating desktops and servers gets a lot easier and more predictable when outside experts are called in to focus the process.

By Sandra Gittlen

Illustration by Christian Northeast

COMPANIES ARE facing a serious catch-22. A push for tighter enterprise security and greater compliance is speeding the move to upgrade to the latest Microsoft operating systems and applications. But the complexity and cost associated with large-scale migrations presents a daunting obstacle.

“Migrating desktops and servers is critically important for IT organizations,” says Lance Travis, vice president of outsourcing strategies at AMR Research Inc. in Boston. “Companies must have an accurate asset inventory, know what’s running on all their desktops, and be able to quickly deploy patches and updates.”

He concedes, however, that migrations take their toll on IT groups. “They don’t add any top-line value, but if you do it poorly—or not at all—

they can take away from the bottom line,” Travis says.

This is why, he says, many companies are turning to outsourcers, such as offshore giant Infosys Technologies Ltd.

Infosys, a Microsoft Global Systems Integration Alliance Partner, developed a two-part program for IT groups looking for the benefits of newer Microsoft server, desktop, and domain packages such as Windows Server 2003, Windows XP, and Office 2003/XP. The program is made up of the recently announced Deployment Agreement, which is closely aligned with Microsoft’s Enterprise Agreement, and the Accelerated Deployment program.

Compatibility worries slow deployments

Organizations have been avoiding upgrades because of serious concerns, says K.B. Prasad, group engagement manager at Infosys in Chicago. “They are worried about their existing applications not being compatible, that there are no best practices for desktop deployments, that they don’t have enough skilled resources for addressing line-of-business needs, and that there is no visible predictability in the total cost of ownership,” he says.

Infosys says it is attacking the predictability issue with the Deployment Agreement program that spans at least three years and features fixed per-license, per-desktop costs for deployment and support so that IT groups can safely budget for migrations.

But Alain Meeus, product manager in Microsoft’s Windows Client Business Group, points to other concerns users have besides costs. “Customers are struggling with deploying Windows XP and Office 2003 because it’s a complex thing. Deployment touches business at its core and affects the productivity of workers,” says Meeus. “There’s a cost and risk associated with interrupting business.”

The second part of Infosys’ program, the Accelerated Deployment program, is targeted at companies with more than 5,000 desktops, 100 servers, and 200 applications. This program to date has been employed by more than a dozen organizations. One client, a large insurance firm that wishes not to be named, falls under strict industry regulations. It needed to both boost compliance and lock down its desktops, says Prasad. It also sought to eliminate support desk calls. It had been supporting Windows 95, 98, and NT, having to develop a new desktop image for each bit of hardware that came into the enterprise.

Prasad says the company wanted to move to a common operating system environment and create a standard image for desktops that was hardware-independent. The insurance company used the Accelerated Deployment program to migrate to Windows XP and make their current applications—desktop and mobile—interoperable. The overall benefit, he says, was that the firm is now able to deploy uniform applications, such as claims programs, securely across the enterprise.

AMR Research’s Travis says using an outsourcer for operating system and desktop migration can save a company 50% to 70%. He says the use of offshore, lower-wage engineers, along with the experience outsourcers bring to the table and the inside knowledge of Microsoft’s suite of products, all save an IT organization

time and money. Prasad says the key to Infosys’ assessment is a proprietary tool that resembles a crawler. The crawler resides on a server and is activated by a log-in script or e-mail-based link that a user initiates. It gathers into a database details about all the internal, remote, and mobile devices across the enterprise, including hardware and software.

The information returned is used to determine not only software requirements, but also hardware and BIOS needs. The crawler details critical application information from across the organization, such as time and date of its last use. “A lot of our customers have been struggling with moving customized applications forward,” says Microsoft’s Meeus. “There are oftentimes applications that are niche to a limited number of users and they are not always owned by central IT organizations, but rather by business units.” He says business units worry a move away from their current platform of Windows 95, 98, or NT 4 will compromise home-grown applications—a fear that is well-founded.

Another wild card in doing upgrades is application add-ons. The crawler trolls for and inventories Microsoft Excel macros and Microsoft Access database hooks, among other things. “Organizations want to get a handle on all this stuff as they represent a significant resource investment from customers,” Meeus says.

Once the information is gathered, IT groups are able to sift through the information and pare down their systems. Some things to consider: what applications will get moved to a new platform, what will be retired, what needs to be upgraded, what needs to be fixed, and what new equipment is needed to support the new platforms and software.

Finally, once the applications have been fixed and tested in the company’s offshore lab, an IT group sets a deployment time and asks users to leave their desktops on. Infosys then pushes out the new software via its centralized distribution model.

Travis says this hands-off approach is a boon for IT organizations. “Migrations have a lot of process around them and require careful attention to detail,” he says. Offloading this task allows IT groups to “do more innovative things for the business.”

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resources

Go to www.microsoft.com/executivecircle/infosys for additional resources, including:

- An online supplement to this story, describing how to make an outsourcing migration work, titled “Finding success in outside experts”
- A webcast on Infosys’ Accelerated Deployment solution that IDs the best migration paths to Microsoft technologies
- A look at the benefits of moving to Windows and Office XP, titled “Who’s afraid of an enterprise upgrade?”