

VIRTUALIZATION AND COLLABORATION: A WINNING COMBINATION FOR A REMOTE WORK FORCE

By Carl Azar

With so many employees working in field offices, construction jobsites, and across remote locations, few businesses have as great a challenge keeping their work force connected as do construction companies. Application virtualization is a relatively new computer networking technology that, when combined with the right collaboration platform, can improve remote accessibility and employee collaboration, as well as bring other benefits for IT administration and the company.

THE VIRTUALIZED NETWORK

Application virtualization is an IT technology that, put simply, allows software applications to be delivered as a service to users without the need to install or manage software on individual desktop or laptop computers. For example, Microsoft Word is an application that most people have installed on their computers. In a virtualized network, however, Word can be installed on a centralized server at headquarters, and employees in the office and at other locations can launch and use the application just as if it were on their own machine.

Microsoft Word is a simple example, but for construction IT departments that must manage and deploy dozens of applications—some of which are highly specialized in areas of project management, design, or construction finance—across a work force that is often spread far and wide, simplicity can evaporate quickly.

The ability to serve up applications to employees everywhere from a centrally managed location offers obvious benefits for a remote work force. People in the field can immediately access the same applications via the network connection as employees in the office. New applications, updates, and version releases are rolled out and available to everyone at the same time by IT administrators working in the central office.

Virtualization and its inherent consolidation of applications also offers other benefits to the company, including the consolidation of technology (a cost savings), greater control over proprietary or sensitive information, and more simplified business continuity planning.

COLLABORATION: KEEPING THE WORK FORCE CONNECTED

While virtualization offers a networking solution with benefits for both IT staff and users alike, combining virtualization with a framework for collaboration, such as a document management platform, lays a solid foundation for keeping employees truly “connected” and collaborating in a productive work environment.

Virtualization offers a new alternative for deploying document management services across the work force and replaces the unsophisticated and error-prone methods of exchanging information using mail, faxes, e-mail, shared network drives, etc.

ENABLING DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT OVER CITRIX

Many software applications perform seamlessly in a virtualized environment, just as they would in a traditional network; however, it is worthwhile to consider various networking and integration options and to look for those applications that are optimized for virtualization. In the construction industry, it is also important to consider the capability of collaboration software to integrate with the core-specialty construction applications, such as construction project management software or construction finance software packages.

One example is a virtualization-ready package introduced recently for Document Locator, an enterprise-class document management system that already offered specific capabilities for the construction industry. It simplifies the deployment of a collaboration platform across a virtualized network, such as that offered by Citrix Systems in their XenApp (formally Presentation Server) or Microsoft’s Terminal Services.

As with other applications, Document Locator can be installed for a virtualized network so that software installation and configuration for document management takes place only on the server, with document management available to client computers no matter what their location. The net result is a decrease in the amount of time and effort required to deploy document management across an enterprise.

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This approach helps IT departments extend the same level of document control and collaboration over the virtualized environment as on a traditional server-PC network.

When considering application virtualization deployments, companies generally have the following options:

- Businesses operating exclusively on a virtualized network can deploy at the server level and provide full functionality at the user workstation level.
- Businesses operating in a mixed environment (for example, using Citrix to provide remote connectivity while supporting a traditional network in the office) can deploy across both environments simultaneously.

AT WORK IN THE REAL WORLD

With document management served with application virtualization, all employees access the same user interface to manage and collaborate on documents. Automated version control records all changes and maintains an accurate history of documents. Users can search and share content instantly from any location. Finally, network bandwidth is not consumed with large file transfers to and from outlying PCs.

Using a document management system in a company-wide virtualized environment means that project managers on jobsites can receive notifications direct from accounting staff to review and approve invoices electronically; staff working at satellite offices can collaborate on proposals and agreements with people working in headquarters or traveling on the road; and project documents like change orders and requests for


information (RFIs) can be documented and accessible by all who need access no matter where they are.

DOWNSIDERS

As with any technology, there are some potential downsides to application virtualization that should be considered. The most obvious is that a network connection is required for any work to get done. Because the applications are being run on a central server, they simply cannot be used without a network connection. In construction, this may be a real issue for remote sites. Network connection speed can also be a concern, although in a different way. Traditionally, a slow network connection translates to slow movement of data files. With application virtualization, a slow network connection can lead to frustratingly slow application response to even the simplest operations. If in doubt, these performance issues need to be tested prior to committing to this technology.

A GROWING TREND

Network virtualization is a growing trend among businesses across all industries. Technologies like Citrix XenApp, VMware, and Microsoft's Terminal Services are leading in this area, helping companies maximize software investment and gain new options for remote connectivity. For construction firms, virtualization is another alternative for the "connection challenge," but without a document management system in place, the framework is still missing for collaboration. Combining virtualization with a document management platform provides a complete framework for collaboration. ♦




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