The allure of the log-in-anywhere desktop

How can organisations simplify desktop management if we all still want our own devices?

Bryan Betts, July 2021

We humans are suckers for immediacy. Once we realise it is possible not to have to wait – and that we have the power to make it happen – then to paraphrase Freddie Mercury, it's "I want it here, and I want it now!"

It's one of the reasons so many of us carry smartphones – these days, who wants to wait until they get home to download their messages, or to have to find a phone box? And it's why so many people have Amazon Prime subscriptions – it's also why bricks and mortar retailing won't completely die out, but that's another story.

And it explains quite a bit of the history of personal computing, if you think about it in terms of portability and ubiquity. We invented laptops so we could take our PCs with us, then Wi-Fi let us connect them easily, and now LTE-enabled tablets and smartphones mean we can carry Internet access almost anywhere we go.

Hardware ties remain – as do related management costs

But in almost every case – even, or perhaps especially, the smartphone – we are still wedded to our own hardware. Some of this is psychological: for many people, the 'personal' in PC translates to "Mine!" And some is practical - borrowing someone else's device means dealing with an unfamiliar set-up, and a different set of applications and short-cuts. Then you need to log into your online files or insert your USB stick, with all the security considerations that entails.

It's no surprise then that, as the capabilities of browser-based apps have grown, we are doing more and more that way. Once you commit – and it can be a big commitment – to Google Workspace, Microsoft Office365, Dropbox, Box or maybe a smaller player such as Zoho, you can work from almost any device with an up-to-date browser.

We're even seeing web-based collaboration set-ups that you can install and host yourself. I recently chatted with on-prem office suite provider Collabora, which has worked with

Ubuntu creator Canonical and open-source team-ware developer Nextcloud to build an [all-in-one collaboration appliance](#). Essentially, you install this on a device of your own – even something as small as an Intel NUC or Raspberry Pi, and then publish all those web-based shared services on your own domain.

At the client end, Google's ChromeOS platform extends it in a different direction, drastically simplifying desktop and user management by making the device essentially a hardware web browser. And yes, I know many Chromebooks can also run local applications, but the aim is the same: access all your files and your familiar personal desktop setup from anywhere, on any ChromeOS device.

Buying into ubiquitous access: can you really make it pay?

For many users, this kind of ubiquitous access is ideal. If you're already invested in web-based email, documents and so on, it probably resembles how you work right now, logging in from your work desk or your home laptop as needed. It might also mean you are a good candidate for a Chromebook or similar.

It is not going to suit all needs, though. Users can be classified into groups, and the needs of those groups can vary greatly – this is something that keeps coming through in our research. For example, some will be fine with doing everything through the browser, whether at home or in the office, while others may need something closer to a regular laptop so they can work on the move or when they're offline. And some high-spec 'requirements' may be driven more by ego than any real need.

Applications vary too, and it might be that your organisation relies on apps that aren't web-based. In that case you may need to look at alternative routes, such as server or cloud-based virtual desktops, delivered on thin-client desktop devices. On the other hand, if only a few users need these apps then this group could perhaps be supplied with suitably-configured PCs or more capable Chromebooks.

The key is not to assume it's a binary decision. No, it's not one-size-fits-all, but neither is it "Our users are too diverse to take advantage of these opportunities to consolidate and simplify desktop management." Look for groupings or clusters of requirements, use the 80/20 rule if need be: those opportunities really are there.

FREEFORM DYNAMICS

About the author - Bryan Betts

Bryan has been analysing, explaining and writing about IT and business for around three decades. His experience spans the early days of minicomputers and PC technology to the latest developments of the software-defined age in which we all live today.

To see more from Bryan, click the following link: www.freeformdynamics.com/author/bryan-b/

About Freeform Dynamics

Freeform Dynamics is an IT industry analyst firm. Through our research and insights, we help busy IT and business professionals get up to speed on the latest technology developments and make better-informed investment decisions.

For more information, visit www.freeformdynamics.com or follow us on Twitter @FreeformCentral