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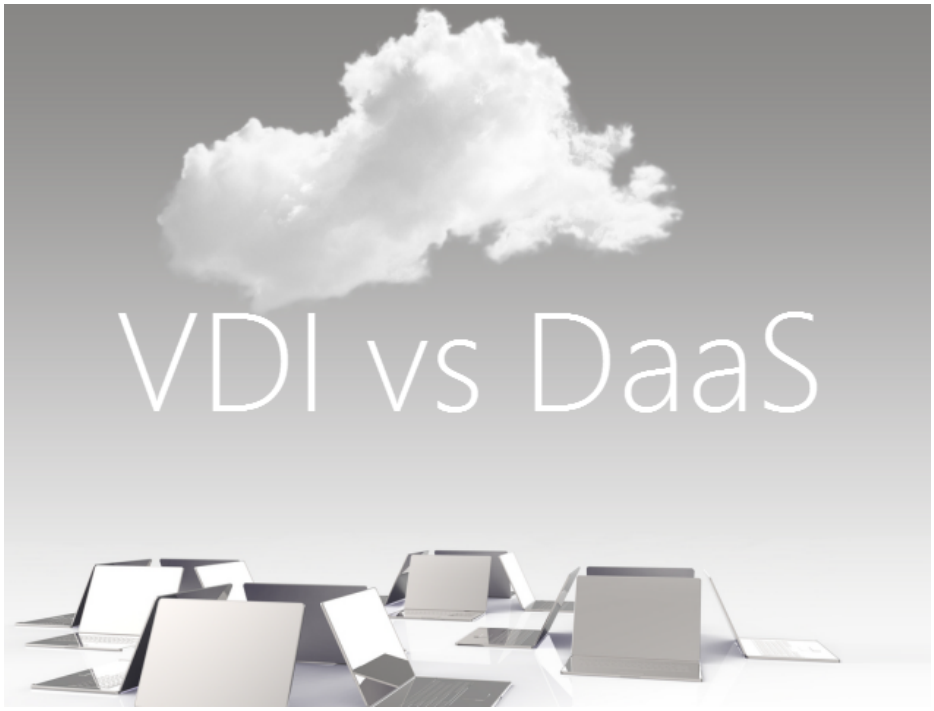
VDI vs. DaaS: What's the Right Choice for Your Business?

By William Freedman , AUGUST 19, 2014 11:00 AM

1. Desktop as a Service vs. VDI - Pros and Cons

When choosing between Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) and Desktop as a Service (DaaS), there's a few things to consider before you move into a cost analysis, including performance, security and disaster recovery. There are viable scenarios and ways to create a business case for both. The right choice will depend on your business needs and goals.



The author of this article is no bomb-thrower. I'm a suburban workadaddy with an MBA and a 20-year history of working full-time for big companies you've heard of. But Desktop as a Service scares 99 percent of the bejeezus out of me.

Let's back up. All IT optimization plays have to do with one thing: efficiency. That's accomplished by using new technology to displace hard, integrally discrete, commodity assets.

Storage has always been on this path -- from tape to disk to flash, all the while retiering, deduplicating and improving the ratio of raw to usable media. Server virtualization followed, slicing up processors so that your developers don't have to wait until next year to get a new image that's 99 percent the same as one they're using now. Managed services and co-location meant that you didn't have to be in the real estate business because you had an IT department. And cloud computing further removed the data center from your company's core business. More recently, software-defined architecture has begun to virtualize the frontier of IT networking, enabling the much anticipated Internet of Things. **Read: Building a Business Case for Cloud Storage**

And all this is grand, until you get into end user computing.

VDI Pros & Cons

VDI is Necessary, but DaaS is Evil

The non-persistent desktop has been a strong automation play since roughly the time of Windows Vista, but maybe that's just coincidence. It became clear that end users, left to their own devices (no pun intended), would gum up the works with all kinds of menus, toolbars, scrolls and other Windows rot, on their way to parking all their personal files on the hard drive and inadvertently deleting or corrupting critical work files to do it. (Excellent post about this on the By The Bell blog.)

As more people came to work from home on at least a part-time basis, and more people brought devices to work which were a lot more user-friendly than the division CIO was going to spring for, the problem just got worse and VDI became all the more attractive.

So why move it to the cloud? This is actual ad copy from one VDI provider:

> "In a commitment-phobic culture, one of our favorite penny-pinching mottos is, 'Why buy when you can lease?' ... [W]hy purchase a vehicle when there's Zipcar? Why splurge on that new gown when Rent the Runway is at your fingertips?"

Are they marketing to you? They're not marketing to me. Are you "commitment-phobic" or "penny-pinching?" Did you climb in your $6/day Honda Civic to take your daughter shopping for a hand-me-down prom dress? If so, how much per week is Rent-A-Center charging you for your laptop?

DaaS Pros & Cons

Even Evil has a Purpose

If you're a Star Wars fan, and honestly who isn't, then you know of the evil Empire, against whom the noble Rebel Alliance contends. The point has been made, though, that George Lucas has us rooting for the wrong side. The Empire might be brutal, but it is orderly, meritocratic, supportive of regulated trade and provides a strong and agile military response to external threats. So if Darth

Vader and Emperor Palpatine weren't all bad, maybe we can say a few nice things about DaaS.

Security and disaster recovery are two very good reasons to look at DaaS, especially as BYOD and streamlined, automated systems management inform the decision.

Equinix, the pioneering co-location and internet exchange company, has been working diligently to keep current as a cloud play. As such, you'd expect them to tout anything ending in "as a Service," and you'd be right. This includes desktop, and they make excellent arguments for many use cases.

They're certainly right about mergers and acquisitions. It makes sense for the acquiring enterprise to be able to bring a whole slew of new, distinct users on board in a hurry. Then, when the dust settles on the integrated enterprise, users can be unloaded just as fast, irrespective of which organization they came from.

"I have personal experience working with a large health care insurer that had acquired a claims processing company in a distant city," writes Equinx cloud expert Ephraim Baron. "As is often the case, there was an integration deadline with severe financial penalties if it were missed. In this instance, the acquiring company began by building out a virtualized desktop environment."

By clicking an icon on their existing workstations, the new employees could access anything they needed from their new mother ship. Baron also points to education as a practical use case. He's on to something here: A panoply of diverse, unsupported, unsecured, individually owned devices. A need to deliver consistent data to a varied audience that -- and here's the kicker -- is known to be moving on to another enterprise within the next four years. Turnover is both high and highly predictable.

"Rather than the school providing a system, DaaS students are assigned a desktop virtual machine that they connect to over the network," Baron writes. "The virtual machines can be imaged with the specific applications needed to support the classes they are taking while avoiding licensing and support costs of unnecessary applications. The target virtual machine is locked down -- no administrative access, no extra storage for non-school files -- and optimized for capacity and performance."

By the same token, we can imagine other use cases where we're dealing with a collection of diffuse resources. Concert tours come to mind. These are largely ad hoc organizations where collaboration is key across technical, artistic and support domains. A core group goes from town to town, and local resources roll on and off for a day or two. DaaS might be the way to go.

Same goes for any other kind of event planning. Currently, this author is planning a bar mitzvah for one of his sons. If you're unfamiliar with bar mitzvah prep, let's just say we hired Michael Bay as our caterer. To pull off an extravaganza like this, you need a whole lot of people who might never see each other again completely in synch for one day. No sense having a whole VDI infrastructure; better to just pay by the drink with DaaS.

All this -- and everything else in the developed world -- leads to the sharing economy. If you're willing, or even eager, to participate in a structure where you're constantly moving from virtual enterprise to staff augmentation role to special project back to virtual enterprise, then you should greet DaaS with open arms. Certainly, if you're looking to be a captain of such industries, DaaS is exactly what you're looking for in end user platforming.

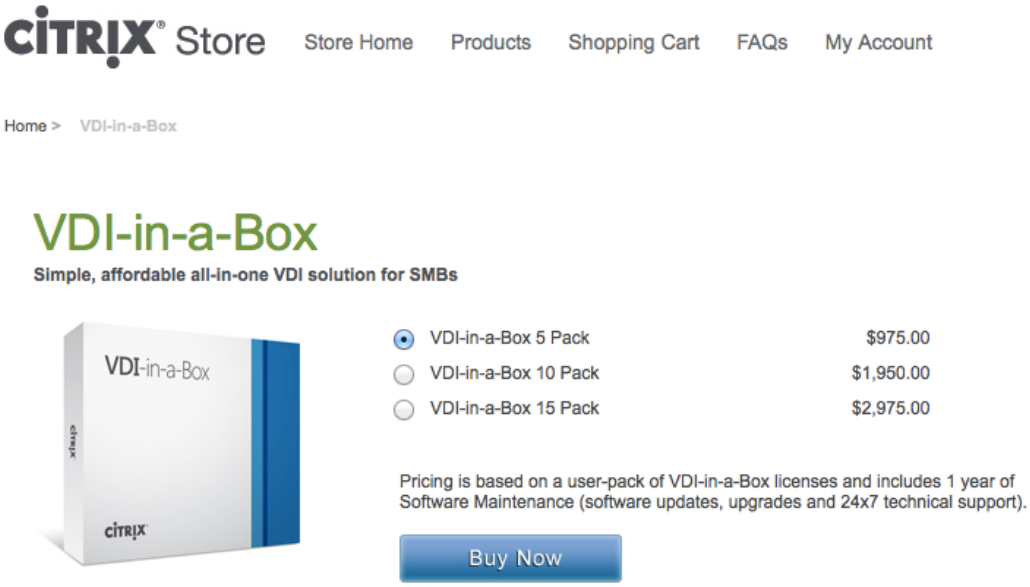
My concern, then is with the non-techies, the non-creatives, the regular office drones who handle accounts payable or appointment scheduling or compliance issues. Since the advent of VDI, it's been technologically possible to let someone go simply by turning off their virtual desktop. And now, with DaaS, there is no longer a financial barrier to doing this.

So how long do you think it'll take before this happens to thousands of people every day?

What's the Business Case?

I'm really struggling with this. I mean, doing something evil usually has an airtight value proposition, and I'm just not seeing it in DaaS.

How much cheaper than in-house VDI can DaaS be when a small business can get a year of Citrix's version for $200 per instance, including the first year's care and feeding?



A quick-and-dirty market scan showed that VMware's street price for DaaS is almost $250 per instance, or 40 percent higher.

VMware Horizon DaaS
Windows Desktops and Apps as a Cloud Service. Backed by VMware.

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VMware Horizon DaaS On Premise Platform: 500-Pack **- Note: Purchase of SnS is required!**	#HZ-DS-500-C List Price: $137,500.00 **Our Price: $123,750.00**	+ Add to Cart

By the way, the "SnS" referred to in the above ad -- support and service -- is another $180 per instance per year.

The low-baller right now is Leostream, which boasts "as low as $10 a month," hosted on either HP's or AWS's cloud. Not surprisingly, this is the company that was so eager to compare itself to Zipcar and Rent the Runway.

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Of course, these aren't precisely comparable solutions. Different vendors, different technologies, different functionalities -- but overall fulfilling the same requirement. The only point here is, don't assume that the cloud solution is going to be cheaper than the in-house solution.

The in-house solution, of course, is going to be more labor intensive, so you have to tack on the support for old-school VDI as well.

So what does the business case for DaaS hinge on?

"The automation reduces not only the cost of manual processing, but also the likelihood of human error," according to at least one IDC report, as well as every vendor's marketing hype.

So when you hear this, poke around a little. Find out how much those VDI operations folks are actually paid and compare that to what you'd be charged for DaaS. Then address the fallibility factor: How error-prone are these employees? Probably not very, or they wouldn't still be working there.

Lastly, dust off the business case someone used to sell your enterprise on VDI years ago. What do you think was the premise? In all probability: "The automation reduces not only the cost of manual processing, but also the likelihood of human error."

The cycle only becomes vicious when there are no more humans involved to call overpriced and incompetent.

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