

JUST SAY NO TO PROPELLER HEADS

Why are UK businesses still held to ransom by the need for technical expertise to keep even the most basic IT systems up and running? Network appliances should not be constrained to routers and Network Attached Storage, argues Malcolm Cartledge, Director, Kyzo, as email and communication servers can leverage the same model to deliver low cost, high reliability and release organisations from the stranglehold of the IT Propeller Head.

Too Immature

The computer industry has traded on its relative immaturity for too long. It is simply no longer reasonable to argue that rapid technology change demands constant product innovation and expensive consultancy to create made-to-measure solutions for every business.

It is over 20 years since the PC revolution introduced technology to business and personal users alike. Yet, despite the increased usability of some desktop solutions, the implementation, support and maintenance processes remain complex and highly expensive. Furthermore, these standard technologies, technologies that underpin the productivity and performance of virtually every global business, offer appalling levels of reliability and uptime. The reality of IT use in 2005 is a long, long way from the predictions of 1980's sci-fi experts.

Perhaps anti-gravity boots were a little optimistic, but no one would have expected that both businesses and individuals would still rely so heavily on the IT experts, the propeller heads, without whom these systems simply fail to work for prolonged periods of time.

And some of the futuristic visions are working today: there is a growing range of standard household goods – from fridges to cookers – which possess intelligent technology that enables remote management. So why does it take a techno-freak to keep an email server up and running?

Standard Appliance

Of course, the IT industry has grasped the appliance concept, enabling a low cost, reliable plug and play approach to be adopted in some instances. However, these tend to be single usage items – such as Network Attached Storage (NAS) or ADSL routers. Indeed, purchasers would, today, be horrified to purchase an ADSL router that did not work out of the box. Just imagine the horror of buying an ADSL router and finding it required you to install and configure an operating system before it would work! The reality is that, despite its underlying complexity, a user simply has to type in a user name and password and the product works.

Recognising that ADSL routers or NAS meet universal business needs, vendors have leveraged standard components, design and testing to deliver low cost, highly reliable solutions. But such mass production techniques should not be limited to single function products. Why cannot standard, albeit multi-function, items such as email and communication servers follow the same concept?

The answer - money. The majority of IT vendors and resellers make little profit on product – and instead have to claw back cash via service and support. Therefore they choose to offer customers made to measure or tailored solutions for even the most standard technology. Such customised solutions are, by their nature, unique – requiring tailored maintenance and support services and, due to the frequent incompatibility of components, constant attention to keep the system up and running and supporting this critical business function.

But, let's be honest, this is not voodoo science: however a company chooses to use email or Internet services – from mass mailings to on-line sales - the underlying technology is the same. There is no need for customised solutions. So why are so few resellers offering a standard network appliance?

The Microsoft Challenge

Of course, for those resellers selling Microsoft technology the options for delivering standard appliances are slightly less broad since even identical implementations can create different reliability problems. But, already, network appliances are being used across the UK for email and communications by organisations ranging from holiday companies to specialist manufacturers.

These companies are no longer reliant on the propeller heads to sweep in, superhero style, to regularly restart unreliable systems. Instead they are leveraging standard components, including operating system, services, applications and hardware that have been tested together to ensure complete compatibility. Furthermore, just like other network appliances such as routers and NAS, these devices automate mundane tasks such as system log management, ensuring they require little day-to-day maintenance – and limited technical expertise.

Nor does the need for a security add-on or upgrade prompt crossed fingers and preparation for downtime or complete system failure that results from the unpredictable effect of new technology on made to measure solutions. The standard configuration enables the device to include a high level of integrated security which is automatically fine-tuned to the optimal settings based on the specific system configuration; while the entire software system can be upgraded together, automatically, with less than two minutes of downtime – and few on going problems.

Add preventative fault management and maintenance – and system reliability is far beyond the wildest dreams of most UK businesses. The result: no need to beg, steal or borrow technical expertise or pay through the nose for day to day support and maintenance.

No Superhero

The IT industry has held its customers to ransom with the 'complexity' argument for too long – there is simply no justification today for the made to measure solution that requires legions of propeller heads to keep it running from day to day. This is madness -no organisation has such unique email and Internet requirements to demand the level of customisation that most vendors and resellers deem essential.

Network appliances are standard components in many areas – why not communication servers? The technology is proven, tried, tested and reliable. It is not only more reliable, at a lower up front cost but, critically, the consistency of components ensures easy upgrades and releases organisations from the stranglehold of the IT technician. These people may appear to be

superheroes, sweeping in to sort out problems that are pushing an organisation to the brink but, in reality, they are simply sorting out their own mess.

The IT resellers need to get to grips with a changing world – appliances will become an increasingly core part of business infrastructure, particularly for smaller organisations who will have a range of low cost reliable appliances delivering communications and a range of application software solutions that do not require technical intervention. The sci-fi vision may yet to be fulfilled, but the days of the propeller head superhero is numbered.

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