



VARs must address the end user application revolution

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The apps are coming, the apps are coming. And IT had better be ready.

Monitoring, if not controlling, the influx of downloaded apps in corporate accounts tops the list of IT manager concerns VARs hear most from their customers.

At a time when many businesses rely on employees to bring their own PCs or endure the use of non-sanctioned iPads and smartphones in the office, getting a handle on all non-sanctioned downloads is a huge issue for IT departments and the VARs that support them.

It's not just non-work-related applications (Angry Birds anyone?). It's also about being able to judge when a business application gets enough traction so that buying and installing it centrally makes more sense than paying for a ton of one-offs. Employees typically download now and expense such apps later. And from a compliance point of view, it's critical to know what knowledge workers have on their devices, beyond the usual Microsoft Office and Symantec AntiVirus.

"We get these questions all the time," said George Brown, CEO of Database Solutions Inc., a VAR based in King of Prussia, Pa. "The biggest problem is finding out when there's enough critical mass for an application so IT should pay attention to it."

For companies where employees are on the corporate network all day, it's not so much an issue because there are LAN-based monitoring tools to keep track of everything. The problem is it's hard to track and monitor apps that come into remote devices that only sporadically connect to the corporate network.

"Microsoft System Center can detect what they're using assuming they're connected," Brown said. "The problem revolves around all the disconnected users, many of whom are knowledge workers with very specific tastes when it comes to applications. They love to try things out," he said.

New view: IT as service provider

Ben Messar, director of IT for NWN Corp., a VAR based in Waltham, Mass., said it boils down to proactive thinking on the part of IT.

"In the old days, IT was viewed as the police department, always saying no to end users. You can't be that anymore. You have to educate your users, accommodate them on what they need, and we need tools to see what's really out there." Messar said.

Leigh Carpenter, director of strategic services for Nth Generation Computing Inc., a San Diego-based VAR, agreed that IT has to adapt. Turns out this was also a big topic at the company's recent 11th Annual Symposium.

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“Our big message [to customers] is you have to get fast enough that your users don’t go elsewhere for the services and the software they need,” she said. In short, IT has to embrace this new world of app downloads, not defend against it.

That message is tough to swallow for many IT professionals. “A lot are still talking about adding more security to their firewalls to stop all the downloads,” Carpenter said.

App delivery tool sets lacking

Several VARs agreed that current tools for monitoring and managing downloads are inadequate. There are big, expensive things like IBM’s Tivoli systems management suite, but that caliber of tool is too much for many shops. Some vendors now have less pricey and simpler tools in their portfolios. NWN is impressed with both Big Fix, now known as IBM Tivoli Endpoint Manager, and with Dell’s asset management tool, which Dell acquired with Everdream a few years ago.

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Nth Generation often uses Lakeside Software’s SysTrack for VDI assessments but also found that it’s useful to see what users are running on their desktops for other purposes, Carpenter said.

Technologies such as these can help IT get a retroactive grip on applications once they are installed. But it would be really helpful for IT to know what apps end users look at before they hit the download button.

NWN customers often come to Messar for his expertise because he performs the app-watching function at NWN itself. “We often get calls from our customers’ IT asking about specific applications and those calls get routed to me,” he said.

Business and procurement processes can help companies get their end users on board.

“If companies start telling their users that they won’t be reimbursed for stuff that isn’t checked out first, it would save a lot of heartache,” said Database Solutions’ Brown.

Such policies might actually save companies money on their software buys. If

50% of a company’s end users want to try a certain download to perform functions that are not being done well with IT-certified software, the company might actually drop the non-productive software and sub in the new stuff.

A good understanding of this technology shift is critical for VARs and integrators, said Eric Johnson, CEO of Adara Networks, a San Jose software company that makes software to expedite app delivery.

“Applications and app delivery are critical to a VAR’s business. Applications that are delivered and managed in a scalable, secure way will help them serve customers better and [also make the] end users more productive,” he said.

Johnson said IT departments that refuse to provide needed services risk irrelevance. Corporate employees will stop listening to their IT managers if they don’t give them what they need.

“Say they’re all set up to support BlackBerrys and the business person wants to go with the iPad. [If IT isn’t careful] that business person may just go ahead with the iPad buy and IT will have to adjust after the fact,” Johnson said.

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