

blogs

Defragging the enterprise

Eight from one

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Eight from one. No, it is not the name of a fictional character from Star Trek, but instead refers to an interesting demo I witnessed earlier this week from MiniFrame, which showed off its SoftXpand offering that allows for eight independent workstations to be created from one PC.

Techworld has previously examined the SoftXpand offering here, but it worth reminding readers over what makes it different from the likes of NComputing, which offers the ability to run 11 workstations from one PC. Simply put, SoftXpand is entirely software-based, whereas the NComputing option needs to be plugged into individual access devices.

Indeed, besides the host PC, the workstations running SoftXpand only require a USB hub in order to plug in the keyboards and mice. The individual monitors connect back to the host PC via a simple VGA cable (up to 30 metres apparently, with no repeaters required).

As SoftXpand is not tied to any hardware or software (barring its own software of course), upgrades are a simple matter of installing the new software, rather than replacing old hardware.

Of course, this solution does require that the host PC has multi-headed video cards in order to do this, but as CEO Eli Segal pointed out, powerful graphic cards can now cost as little as \$40, and often they come with multiple heads allowing two monitors to be connected (the more workstations, the more graphic cards needed).

New developments such as some monitors shipping with inbuilt video cards, and the advent of USB video cards, also offer another option here. Indeed, with Intel moving into the graphics arena thanks to its Larabee chip, due in 2009/2010, the need for additional graphic cards will soon be removed.

Segal assured Techworld that one of the traditional weaknesses of this sharing setup, namely the bottlenecks associated with the GPU (Graphical Processing Unit) have been solved thanks to SoftXpand's proprietary load balancing algorithm. "We are the only one to master it," Segal

said, insisting that multiple users may run VoIP, multimedia, graphic and 3D applications simultaneously.

With MiniFrame claiming 83 percent savings for hardware costs, energy consumption, Co2 emissions, installation time, maintenance, network connections, space and noise, what is not to like? Well, it is not exactly an application that is suited to large enterprises, is it?

It is true that applications such as this gain the most traction in education, SMB, call centre, internet cafe and even banking circles. But it could be relevant for enterprises with teams of programmers, or with control rooms, or even for generic workstation expansion reasons, say when a company quickly needs a lot of workstation terminals if running a research project. The other enterprise angle for this technology is for disaster recovery scenarios, where it would be a lot cheaper setting up a backup site using MiniFrame's offering, than forking out for thousands of backup personal computers.

There is no doubt that the thin client argument has been around for a long, long time now, and those involved will always tout the cost saving angle over stand-alone PCs. But there is another interesting point. The canny IT manager will also be aware that old PCs, that are likely to be thrown away at the end of their life cycle, could instead be pressed into service as a thin client, if only for the mouse, keyboard and monitor.

With IT managers nowadays more than keen to explore ways to trim hardware costs and cut carbon emissions, they could do well to consider the SoftXpand offering from MiniFrame and how it could be utilised in their own individual circumstances.

Interested readers can [download a demo here](#).

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