

Software Applications Insight

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SoftXpand's six Windows XP sessions from one PC

Substantial carbon footprint cutting

By Chris Mellor

Thin clients are all very well but they are not thin enough. What we need are 'green screen' type desktop terminals. We need users to have a colour screen, a keyboard and a mouse plus a connection to a PC and be able to run Windows sessions concurrently. There's more than enough hardware capacity in a PC to do this. What's been missing up until now has been the software to do it. Until now ... because there is software to do it.

The SoftXpand product is running in twenty schools in the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire area as part of product set supplied by [Kira Supplies](#). Six users run Windows XP sessions on one PC. The basic hardware set up looks like this:-

- Each user has any kind of screen they wish (CRT, mono, colour, etc.), keyboard, mouse and 4-port USB hub.
- There is a Kira Supplies-built PC featuring:-
 - ASUS motherboard with dual gigabit connections (only one is used) and a built-in RAID controller,
 - E4500 dual-core 2GHz Intel CPU,
 - 2GB RAM. It could rise to 3GB. The motherboard could take 8GB but Windows XP can't use it,
 - nVidia dual head graphics cards,
 - Windows XP Pro software and license.

Roger Anscombe, Kira's MD said his firm builds the PC because Dell and HP-type PCS are built for a fiercely competitive market and cheaper components tend to be used. He can afford to spend ten or twenty pounds more on a component because its cost is going to be spread across six users.

For example, customers could spend £26 on a second disk drive and have RAID 0 mirroring because the motherboard has a built-in RAID controller. It will only cost four pounds something per user; not much at all really.

The terminals must be within 5m of the PC because that is a USB cable length limitation; the total distance between any two terminals would then be 10m.

The cost of such a system would be half the cost of a conventional system.

It is not a thin client system because there is thin client hardware box needed at every workstation, just a simple screen, keyboard, mouse and USB hub set-up. It couldn't be simpler.

The software comes from [MiniFrame](#), an Israeli company founded in 2003. Kira Supplies is the UK distributor and is looking for UK resellers. The formal launch of the system will be in January next year and the company will have a presence at [BETT, Olympia](#) also in January.

There are obvious savings on energy costs running this system. Such a SoftXpand configuration would entail only one PC being powered instead of six. There is less network traffic and no need for five additional PCs to be powered and cooled or, at the end of their life, to be recycled.

The users see a completely straightforward Windows XP environment into which they can install and run any Windows XP application. Their content is private to them but collaborative environments can also readily be arranged. All the users can work with graphics and multimedia applications if necessary. Anscombe says that one system has run six concurrent PhotoShop sessions satisfactorily.

We might speculate about how many sessions a 64-bit Windows server might run but that is just speculation for the future.

You can download trial software from [here](#).

What MiniFrame has done is to go one better than Citrix and produce a multi-user Windows system that does not need any special box at the desktop. Everything apart from screen display, keyboard and mouse input is done by a single PC for up to six users. The desktop end of things is simpler than in a Citrix thin client system and much, much simpler than having six PCs in a network. Five PC system boxes can be dispensed with straightaway. It means simpler support and management, and reduced maintenance costs.

It looks very good for groups of up to six users who can be located within a 10m radius of a host PC. That means at the back of classrooms, a senior person's staff group office, a call centre group and a library-type installation.

Within these constraints it looks like an excellent way to save on equipment acquisition costs and to cut your carbon footprint from such groups of users substantially.