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Citrix FlexCast - Why It Matters

RKON Tech Brief by Christopher DeMichael

In today's ever changing technology market, the lines are often blurred between actual technology and marketing. In some cases, the line is so blurred that it's hard to tell what matters and what does not. For example, ICA messaging turns into HDX, which sprouts into Nitro, and Mach 3, all the while we are still talking about the ICA protocol.

Similar blurry messaging surrounds Citrix FlexCast. However, the technology behind it, and most importantly the flexibility of that technology, is truly impressive. To be clear, FlexCast is all about desktop virtualization. So, let's first discuss the meaning around desktop virtualization, then the meaning around Flexcast, and finally uncover why FlexCast matters.

What does Desktop Virtualization Really Mean?

It sounds pretty simple. Desktop virtualization is the virtualization of a user's desktop operating system. And that is absolutely true. What is often lost in the marketing though is that there are many different ways to virtualize a desktop. Take for example Virtual Desktop Infrastructure or VDI. In the marketing battles between VMware and Citrix, the term VDI has become synonymous with desktop virtualization, but that is only part of the story. In reality, VDI is only one particular method of virtualizing a desktop. Specifically, it is the technology that presents a single virtual instance of an Operating System to an end user. But desktop virtualization should be so much more than that (keep in mind that VMware only does VDI so you won't hear this from them).

VDI is not the first and only time we have ever virtualized a desktop. Take for instance terminal services. While a terminal services desktop is shared between many users, it is most certainly a virtualized desktop. This method of desktop virtualization has been around for years and years and there are millions of users using them today. Another method that has been around for quite some time consists of streaming an operating system from the datacenter to the user. Arden had been doing this for quite some time even before Citrix acquired them in 2006. More recently, client side or Type-1 hypervisors have been developed to run a virtualized desktop operating system on the endpoint itself, opening the door to this technology to those users not connected to the datacenter all of the time. All of these technologies are indeed different, yet they all retain a common goal: to make desktop management easier and more consistent through the use of "golden images."

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What does FlexCast really mean?

FlexCast is desktop virtualization and all of the available methods of both virtualizing that desktop, as well as delivering it to the end user. FlexCast is Citrix's entire suite of application and desktop virtualization products all tied into a single license (XenDesktop Enterprise or Platinum Editions). Let's take a look at the individual components of the FlexCast model and explore how they translate to the products we are familiar with.

- ***Physical Desktops On-demand applications-Citrix XenApp.*** Both published and streamed applications. The same application delivery technology most companies have been using for more than a decade.
- ***Local VM-based desktops- Citrix XenClient.*** This is Citrix's relatively new client side (Type-1) hypervisor. Much like the hypervisors we are familiar with in the datacenter, this product installs to bare metal providing an abstraction between the endpoint's hardware and the operating system itself.
- ***Local Streamed desktops- Citrix Provisioning Services (PVS).*** This is the technology that allows us to stream a golden image to a physical desktop located in the environment.
- ***Hosted VM-based desktops- Citrix XenDesktop.*** This is what is commonly referred to as VDI. A single virtual machine runs in the datacenter for every logged in user.
- ***Hosted shared desktops-Citrix XenApp.*** This is the publishing of an entire desktop via XenApp and terminal services with many users sharing instances of the same operating system.

Why does FlexCast matter?

Any successful IT project is not simply about implementing the best technology, it is far more important to implement the right technology. That could mean many different things to many different businesses. For some it is simply the most cost-effective, for others it might be implementing the best performance, and other might be about implementing the easiest solution to manage on an ongoing basis. And it could mean many more things to your particular business depending on your needs. Ultimately, the best solution is almost always a combination of all of these things. This is where the flexibility and the breadth of solutions that Citrix's FlexCast model provides will pay off.

The process of implementing enterprise desktop virtualization is a complex one. In fact, I would argue that it should be complex. It is after all, a dramatic shift in not only technology, but philosophy that can provide great benefit and impact for an organization. The roadmap to a successful enterprise desktop virtualization project can only truly benefit the business when the right solution, using the right technology, fit to the right user is implemented. Citrix FlexCast with all of its components provides the enterprise with all of the options necessary to provide that right fit.

To explore Virtual Desktop and Flexcast more, contact Chris at cdemichael@rkon.com.

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