

NHBC Builds Virtual and Physical Desktops with ProfileUnity

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- Simon Gregory
Principal Infrastructure Analyst, NHBC

Organization:
NHBC

Virtual Desktop Users:
1,100

ProfileUnityTM

Overview

NHBC is the UK's leading independent standard-setting body and provider of warranty and insurance for new homes. The organisation's role is to work with the house-building industry to raise the standards of new homes and to provide consumer protection for home buyers. In order to support its constituencies, NHBC, like many other organisations, employ staff with a diversity of work roles and modes, including in-office, remote and field operations. In particular, NHBC has a roster of Building Inspectors, whose responsibility it is to go on-site to ensure that structures adhere to the standards the organisation enforces. All of these work styles became a major consideration when NHBC decided to upgrade its workspaces to standardise on Microsoft® Windows® 7.

Simon Gregory, Principal Infrastructure Analyst, is part of the team that looks after NHBC's 1,100 office and field workers. With the expiration of Windows XP support, Mr. Gregory knew it was critical to make the move to a next-generation Windows OS and began looking at the various options to migrate to Windows 7. These options spanned the gamut — from writing scripts to migrating data from the local desktop storage to a centralised storage location, to leveraging a user virtualisation solution to perform the migration. However, while investigating migration strategies, it became apparent that this project would simultaneously present a good opportunity to match the desktop delivery platform to the work styles of users for more efficient desktop management.



“We realised that our employees had very specific work modes. So we began to look at desktop virtualisation for those workers who needed access to standard applications but did not have the requirement either to travel, or to run specialised local applications,” said Mr. Gregory. “However, virtual desktops were never intended to be a complete replacement for all workstations. We knew that we would probably have a hybrid VDI/Physical Windows 7 deployment that would be a mix of laptops, Dell® Wyse terminals and VMware® Horizon View desktops.”

The Challenge

With a number of requirements on the table, the challenge for Mr. Gregory and NHBC was to find a solution that could support the migration to Windows 7. But they also wanted to leverage the same solution to support their mixed environment of physical and virtual desktops. This functionality seemed a tall order initially, but Mr. Gregory decided to proceed logically through the selection criteria and test all options against these requirements.

Firstly, NHBC needed to decide whether to move to Windows 7 or Windows® 8. Having concluded that Windows 7 was more mature; NHBC then investigated the option to deploy desktop virtualisation for a selected group of staff, who needed access to standard applications but did not either work remotely or need to run specialised local applications. Ultimately NHBC selected VMware Horizon View desktops to support this group of workers.

“VMware View desktops have been provisioned to home workers in remote regions on Wyse platforms, rather than physical laptops, in an effort to improve responsiveness and give the end user a better overall experience,” said Mr. Gregory.

NHBS power users, however, received a different workspace option. “When it came to our Building Inspectors, we provisioned Lenovo laptops with Windows 7, which have a local installation of required applications along with local data,” said Mr. Gregory. “Given the nature of their role, they are rarely in a position to connect to a wired or wireless broadband line and instead rely on a 3G mobile data solution to connect back to the company through (Microsoft) Direct Access.”

Workers who needed to attend sites or offices had to retain laptops due to dependencies on specific applications that needed local installations.

“For these workers, we provisioned Windows 7 laptops using folder redirection and employing CSC to allow them to function off the network when needed,” said Mr. Gregory. “When back at home base, they connect in via a Virgin-provisioned business broadband line which is an arm of the corporate network, or via a personal line making use of Microsoft Direct Access for corporate connectivity.”

By carefully analysing use cases, NHBC ensured that staff had appropriate workspaces tailored to their needs. However, in creating a hybrid environment, NHBC also created an additional challenge in terms of how to best manage user profiles efficiently across all of these desktop delivery platforms.

VMware® Persona Manager was initially considered, but it became apparent that this solution simply did not offer the functionality required for NHBC’s mixed environment. Therefore, Mr. Gregory proceeded to look for a solution that would answer the range of his needs. The organisation not only required a migration solution to seamlessly migrate users profiles and data to the new Windows 7 environment and manage group policy re-direction, but the solution also needed to support ongoing profile and user environment management post-migration across both virtual and physical desktops.

The Solution

After a discussion with VMware consultants, in which they recommended NHBC look at Liquidware Labs™ ProfileUnity™, Mr. Gregory embarked on a proof of concept. He quickly discovered ProfileUnity provided him the range of functionality he needed for migration, user profile management and user environment management — a total solution.

The Results

Mr. Gregory discovered that ProfileUnity provided him with a level of control, and simplified, centralised management that the other solutions and approaches he investigated just could not match.

“The migration to Windows 7 is still ongoing as we are moving users from XP on a team-by-team basis, across multiple sites,” commented Mr. Gregory. “ProfileUnity gave us an enormous head-start on the migration, as we were able to set off a background sync of user data hosted on the old XP hardware weeks ahead of the planned migration dates. This in turn sped up the migration of an individual, as we were only then concerned with updating new and changed data at the point of the swap out rather than having to wait for a complete copy of the data from the device.”

One of the most important aspects for Mr. Gregory is that ProfileUnity keeps him in familiar territory and allows him to build on processes inherent in Microsoft offerings.

“The group policy redirection functionality, in particular, is what is most meaningful for me,” said Mr. Gregory. “Rather than managing folder redirection through group policy objects, the GUI interface mechanism in ProfileUnity provides us with a single overview of how redirection

is being employed. Due to the complexity of our OU (organisational unit) structure, and use of multiple group policies depending on end user requirements, we thought it would be advantageous to strip back as much as possible from the new group policy objects moving forward. The reasons were two-fold: one, it allows for quicker processing of policies and two, it reduces the risk of errors being introduced due to mismatched configurations.”

Running non-persistent desktops in his virtualised environment, Mr. Gregory is quick to point out that speed of employing folder re-direction with ProfileUnity is a key benefit for him and provides his users with a persistent user experience.

“Alongside the portability management function, where some apps are not captured in a VDI session when logged off, I can capture that registry key and throw it back into the profile. Retaining settings across sessions is very helpful. I am also looking at the FlexApp™ functionality within ProfileUnity. My current testing of dev tools deployment has worked well, and I’m quite impressed so far.”

“The main goal for deploying ProfileUnity was to reduce the number of policy objects and to reduce login times, whether a user has a physical or virtual desktop. The portability that ProfileUnity enables within NHBC is a key benefit for us. To find this functionality — as well as comprehensive migration support — has enabled us to deploy the kind of next-generation desktop environment that was needed to bring our organisation forward,” concludes Mr. Gregory.

