

NWTC Students Make a Smooth Transition to Virtual Desktops

"One of our major goals was to make the transition to virtual desktops really transparent and uphold our goals... ProfileUnity FlexApp has been central to making the transition in a really doable and straightforward way."

*- Brian Zimmerman, Systems Engineer
Northeast Wisconsin Technical College*

Organization:

Northeast Wisconsin
Technical College (NWTC)

Virtual Desktop Users:

1,000 and growing

Products:

ProfileUnity™ FlexApp™

Overview

Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC) serves 42,000 students and offers more than 180 degree, certificate and apprenticeship programs across a diverse range of fields that includes accounting, civil engineering, healthcare, renewable energy and much more. Most programs are designed to be completed in two years or less, which creates significant turnover in the student body. The IT staff at NWTC has an ever-changing and constantly revolving roster of students, systems and applications to support.

The Challenge

With 42,000 students and a wide range of programs, as well as three campuses and five additional regional learning centers, NWTC IT staff spend the lion's share of their time maintaining the sheer scope and quantity of software applications needed to support students. The school undertook an initiative to pare down the number of applications it needed to support – yet, even after a rigorous cutting back, IT staff was still left with more than 500 applications to manage. With a limited staff to manage all the desktops and software across the college, it was clear that a new more efficient approach was critically needed to deliver applications, while at the same time, reduce the amount of time devoted to installing, tracking, patching and upgrading versions of software. "Reducing the number of applications was a necessary first step, but even after that, we realized that it would still be very difficult to support the amount of software we have to manage for all the school's programs," said Brian Zimmerman, systems engineer at NWTC.

Another area of concern for the organization was that each group of students represented a unique desktop image based on their major and where they were in their program. “We have so many possible desktop configurations. That was another major factor that motivated us to explore a virtual desktop infrastructure,” added Kevin Swanson, a desktop specialist in the computer services department.

A final objective was to create a better method of providing a high quality and consistent user experience for all desktops regardless of which classroom, facility or lab students were using

“It is not a good experience when you move around from desktop to desktop and your documents don’t follow you, your screen is different in every classroom and you lose your settings each time,” said Zimmerman. “One of our most important goals was to give people a consistent user experience.”

As an information-gathering exercise, NWTC conducted a limited pilot of VMware® virtual desktops, which provided invaluable insight into how a production-level system needed to be architected and the level of performance it needed to provide to the college. The pilot highlighted yet another big potential problem area: there are hundreds of printers throughout NWTC’s facilities, and the VMware environment did not provide a convenient way to present specific local printer options for virtual desktops.

“Printer management and printer deployment was a big piece of the puzzle. We wanted printers to be presented based on where the user was sitting, not based on which virtual desktop he or she was using,” Swanson said.

“We wanted to make things simple, so users wouldn’t see a list of hundreds of printers when they wanted to print,” Zimmerman said. “We did our research. Between printer management and our other goals to provide a consistent user experience where settings were maintained, we knew – even before going into production mode with virtual desktops – that we needed tools beyond what came with VMware® View. That’s when we started looking at user virtualization solutions, including ProfileUnity FlexApp

The Solution

NWTC’s virtual desktops are built with VMware View v5.1 and are all delivered over 10GB Ethernet from HP® blade servers on a central NetApp® SAN. However the biggest change from pilot to production was the addition of Liquidware ProfileUnity FlexApp to manage the user experience and keep it consistent from session to session. ProfileUnity FlexApp also provided the answer in helping to associate the appropriate desktop images and local printers to users based on their profiles. Currently, approximately 1,000 virtual desktops are in production, which are mainly used by students at this time, although deployments for staff are growing quickly.

“We looked at managing profiles with Microsoft® Active Directory right out of the box, but it wasn’t as flexible as we needed, especially for printer management,” said Zimmerman. “Some of the other user virtualization software packages we looked at were just overwhelming. They were too complex and were very expensive.”



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