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The importance of selecting the right infrastructure for your Business Management System

In the previous articles, I focused on the software and partner selection process. The purpose of this publication is to highlight the importance of infrastructure as part of the total solution. However good your decision process on the business management software, installing it on an inappropriate platform will inevitably detract from the usability of the system. Let's face it; you will face enough challenges in getting the users to accept a new way of working.

If the response time of the new system is slow or it falls over frequently, it will be very difficult to convince the users that it is there to make their life easier. On the other hand, if it is difficult and expensive to support, your total cost of ownership will increase. The impact on your bottom line is unlikely to impress your finance people and can detract from your competitiveness in a market where margins are already under pressure.

Let's start by defining what we mean by infrastructure. Frequently referred to as Information and Communications Technology (ICT), it broadly consists of the ***file servers, PC's or workstations, printers, operating systems, back up devices, switches, routers, cabling, firewalls, virus protection and telecommunications equipment***. These are used to implement Local Area Networks (LAN), Wide Area Networks (WAN), and Virtual Private Networks (VPN). Most businesses have a LAN installed to service the file and print needs of the company. Many also make use of a WAN to facilitate remote links with their customers, suppliers and mobile workers. Access is usually via ISDN or dedicated lines to off site locations.

However, with the maturing of the Internet, the big growth area is in the VPN arena. Rather than using slow ISDN dial up lines or expensive leased lines, a VPN harnesses the power and connectivity of the Internet to provide low cost secure access to your system. Your remote users merely dial their nearest Internet access point from anywhere and the



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world's largest network provides the data transport. A well designed and implemented VPN can provide you with a cost effective efficient means of sharing data with business partners and employees.

A further infrastructure trend worth noting is the move from “thick” client to “thin” client technology. A “thick” client is not a pejorative term. It merely refers to the practise of using PC's as a storage medium for data and using the server to access and share some application information. The issues raised with such a model relate to the difficulty of managing a growing volume of data scattered around multiple PC's frequently in disparate locations. This item comes to the attention of management when a PC crashes or is stolen and vital customer data lost, or a key employee is on holiday and their data is inaccessible.

The thin client model is growing in popularity and refers to the use of powerful servers to host “virtual PC” sessions within this server. These virtual PC sessions are communicated to the end user on their local device, but only screen image, keystrokes and mouse movement are transmitted over the network link. All data processing is carried out at the central server. This means that bandwidth per user can be minimised, data never leaves the secure Server environment and users can make use of less powerful older machines as they are only used as display devices.

One of the key business benefits from the adoption of this approach is reduced cost of ownership. Applications are only installed once at the Terminal Server rather than at every PC. User PCs can be “locked down” and thus the complete solution is easier and less costly to support. When a problem occurs, the IT person can dial in and take control of the user session and help to quickly resolve the reported problem. In addition, setting up new system users is simple and quick. Workstations can be stacked on a shelf and simply delivered for self installation as there is no complicated setup and configuration. More importantly, in these dangerous times where system hacking and virus proliferation is rife, it is easier to protect the company's vital store of business knowledge.

In the past, where a variety of disparate systems were in place, the practice of installing separate servers for additional applications was the norm. This led to the growth of the islands of data syndrome with its hidden costs and lack of information visibility.



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However, the infrastructure demands were less onerous as if a server failed, the impact was restricted to the affected applications. In the modern world of seamlessly integrated business applications, it is vital that all parts of the platform operate efficiently with the core applications. A poorly designed infrastructure can seriously undermine even the most sophisticated business system.

Hopefully, this article will shed some light on some of the more interesting developments in the IT infrastructure marketplace. In the next, I will be turning my attention to the implementation process and how to avoid potential pitfalls. For further information email linkfresh@angliabs.com