

SOFTWARE SOLUTIONS: ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

What makes a great software solution for the support desk – especially when it comes to those ‘hidden’ costs and meeting long-term needs? Brian Wall looks at some of the latest vendor offerings and what lies beneath the lid

Dame Judi Dench in the RSC's production of *All's Well that Ends Well* (photo: Manuel Harlan)

It may well have once been true to say that the face of the service desk industry hasn't changed a great deal and that innovation is scant. After all, technical support is an ancillary service and can be perceived as a cost centre, rather than a value centre.

At RealVNC, however, they think differently. "Digging deeper, innovation exists in this space and the drivers are clear: cost reduction and downtime minimisation," states Adam Greenwood Byrne, the company's VP strategic alliances. "Remote computer control, and specifically VNC technology, has been the single largest contributor in these areas. Our recent partnership with Intel has allowed us to take remote control to the next level and deliver market-leading technology that impresses service desk managers the world over. Where once remote control software was limited to offering control when the operating system is running, with a working network stack and general good health we can now gain control, even when these don't hold true."

Industry first

So let's take a closer look. The Intel vPro chipset builds a VNC server into the hardware itself and allows RealVNC Viewer Plus to connect and maintain a session throughout POST, BIOS and boot, as well as when the OS finally comes up; and even still if it crashes. "We've additionally built in power control which addresses green IT issues, as well as the ability to boot from a remote image, such as a repair disk, and rebuild the OS over a VNC session," he adds. "This is a first for the IT industry – a true software KVM hardware device that enables a single keyboard, video monitor and mouse to control more than one computer one at a time] that requires no additional hardware; it even shares the network interface."

This means a great deal more can now be done without being desk-side, including OS rebuilds, drive corruption repairs, network driver problem resolution and crash repairs, for example.

RealVNC continues to innovate and has launched in the mobile market with VNC Mobile Solution, allowing full remote control of smartphones. With more complex smartphone devices on the market, VNC Mobile Solution provides remote support by providing full device visibility to customer

care representatives," comments Greenwood Byrne. "The screen of any mobile handset can be displayed on the customer care agent's desktop web browser, and enables them to interact with and control the device, as if it were in their hands."

Cool approach

As far as Dave Amos, services director of Applied IT Savings, is concerned, innovation for the service desk now resides in the web, where every user type, irrespective of location and device, can work effectively to deliver improved customer service.

His company's CoolRain solution is a new web-based application, with built-in smartphone integration, designed to replace internally hosted, owner-managed systems. It has been developed from scratch to be deployed using the 'SaaS' model – connecting everyone in the process via a basic browser.

"Users can be located anywhere – in the office, at home and on the road – using 3G-connected laptops, iPads or smartphones. Connections are unlimited, with the number of active service desk agents profiling the



CoolRain: new web-based application with built-in smartphone integration

monthly charge. Alerts for support engineers are sent via SMS to smartphones, containing active URLs, which enable call details to be viewed using only two taps; no logging in, no typing. Call closure detail can be input directly, as agents complete each job.

"Since apps are not needed, anyone can track call progress using their mobile device and view action updates without any pre-planned device set-up or indeed training, extending the access pool to all customers of the desk. Call status is easily tracked by the

KEEPING THE SHOW ON THE ROAD

The world-renowned Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), based in historic Stratford-Upon-Avon, is using VNC Enterprise Edition from RealVNC:

- To provide remote IT monitoring and support for its London offices
- To support the company when it goes on tour nationally and internationally
- During its annual residencies in Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

With more than 500 production staff responsible for putting on performances to over half a million theatre goers last year alone, IT plays a lead role in keeping the show on the road. By deploying VNC Enterprise Edition, the behind-the-scenes RSC IT helpdesk team can now remotely fix any potential problems immediately, without causing disruptions.

Playing to 85% capacity audiences, customer service is a high priority for the RSC. VNC Enterprise Edition enables the RSC to monitor box office customer service

and to maintain electronic kiosks located in the theatre foyers to ensure visitors can always collect their tickets without hassle.

"RealVNC allows our IT helpdesk team to gain easy remote access to any of our PCs or laptops in the UK or across the globe," says Wayne Evans, systems manager at the RSC. "Its flexibility to provide remote monitoring for our box offices and support for our electronic kiosks, also helps us to provide the highest levels of customer service. The wide range of features and functionality offered by VNC Enterprise Edition are proving to be very valuable and the competitive pricing offered by RealVNC is an added bonus."



Royal Shakespeare Theatre from Clopton Bridge.
Photograph by Peter Cook.



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originator (no need to phone in) at their desk or via their smart device, any time they chose, increasing customer satisfaction and reducing the service desk load."

Resilient

In the CoolRain deployment, model cost savings are delivered using a private database per client, implemented on a single server platform, running a common code set. Resilient virtual servers provide flexible capacity, ensuring the platform size matches the load at all times. There is no need for the client to worry about backups or planning for disaster recovery, he states.

"When choosing a cloud service application, functionality may be superseded by the deployment model adopted by the service provider. For example, the issues affecting internally hosted systems – namely when to upgrade the OS and which vendor software release to implement (do you 'freeze' or 'track?') – require a different approach, using SaaS. On a shared platform, all clients accept fixes and minor enhancements at the same time, as this keeps costs low. Major versions can then be deployed on a new platform and clients decide whether to move (track) or stay on the platform they already use (freeze). To support this process, access to new versions of CoolRain is provided via staging servers, where code releases can be tried before choosing what platform to join."

Minefield

Of course, it is something of a minefield out there when searching for a solution that will meet all of your requirements. Where do you start? How do you separate one from another? House-on-the-Hill Software's managing director Iain Broadhead believes there are so many service desk products out there now, doing the same sort of thing, that it can be difficult to find a solution which will meet exact requirements. "People end up settling for a tool that does 'nearly what we want' or compromise for something off the shelf that is 'close enough'. However, it is worth hunting for a tool that can be tailored to best fit," he advises.

SupportDesk by House-on-the-Hill Software is a mature system that has evolved over the years to meet the demands of various markets, sectors and is valued by customers across the globe. "The system has everything

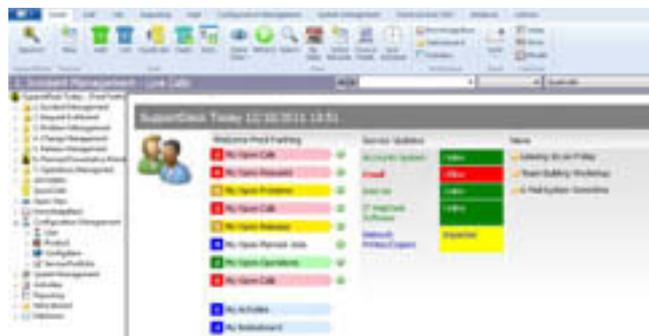
you could want from a service desk and our in-house expertise allows for the added benefit of sophisticated customisation of the software, so that it can provide the perfect fit for any environment," he says.

The base software offers a variety of preconfigured solutions, including IT service management, customer service and support and facilities management. "But SupportDesk has the flexibility to meet numerous other support environments, such as Freedom of Information and complaints management. The solutions can be combined into a multi-functional, enterprise-level service desk or configured to create a specialist environment, designed specifically to suit any service desk need," Broadhead adds.

Ultimately, people will want access to services quicker, easier and on their terms. Therefore, vendors have to deliver innovative, practical solutions to help IT departments meet the expectations of their users.

Tony Probert, european managing director, Cherwell Software

SupportDesk is available as both an on-site and hosted offering, with the SaaS version being available now for three years. The advantages of SupportDesk in the Cloud are said to be wide ranging, including having no downloads, no installation and no fuss. "SupportDesk i3 allows businesses to run a successful and efficient service desk, with a solution built using the latest web technologies, without any of the worries of maintaining the hardware or software themselves," states Broadhead. "We take care of the infrastructure; they take care of business. Payment is on a monthly basis, at



House-on-the-Hill's SupportDesk: next major release early 2012

£25 per helpdesk agent, and our hosted client base is consistently growing, as customers are recognising the benefits of a maintenance-free service desk."

Where to next? "SupportDesk is continuously being developed and our next major release is scheduled for early 2012. A few new features incorporated in this latest version include Graphical Workflow Designer, Map Visualisation, new SupportDesk Mobile interface for iPhone and iPad and advanced change authorisation tools." The new developments were set to be revealed at the company's User Group this November.

In terms of House-on-the-Hill solutions, one that is experiencing increasing interest is SupportDesk FOI, states Broadhead. This is a solution designed for the public sector to deal efficiently with Freedom of Information requests. With councils, governments and public sector services are making the move from paper based to computerised records, SupportDesk FOI is already proving an invaluable, cost saving tool, he adds.

Modern times

So, with so many positives, where does the general market perception that many service desk tools are bland stem from? The fact that they were developed with different client server technologies and using the common design principles of the day, based around forms and SQL tools, states Darren Williams, CEO, LiveTime Software. "Modern applications are heavily abstracted from form-based client server applications, and are much more scalable and flexible, and commonly use multi-tier application designs that scale both horizontally and vertically.

"With considerable advances in modern browsers and notably HTML5, modern service

desk applications like LiveTime resemble traditional rich client applications on the desktop, but with the inherent scalability required for highly concurrent systems. In terms of features, traditional vendors have often stagnated, offering no innovation. There is little incentive to innovate when the bulk of their revenue is based upon consultant engagements. More modern vendors like LiveTime focus on usability and customisations within the application, so that organisations can freely upgrade, without losing changes between major upgrades," he argues.

This flexible design pattern also lends itself well to many deployment models. LiveTime offers traditional software, virtual or hardware appliances and Software as a Service (SaaS). "Many customers are still reticent when it comes to SaaS-based offerings, although they are gaining momentum and now make up 50% of our new installations," adds Williams.

And for those customers who are still unsure, LiveTime provides a no-risk, full credit against a perpetual licence within the first 12 months of using LiveTime's SaaS offering.

“There are so many service desk products out there now, doing the same sort of thing, that it can be difficult to find a solution which will meet exact requirements.”

Of course, any service desk rollout succeeds or fails, based upon the level of integration it delivers. LiveTime provides out-of-the-box integrations to more than 50 enterprise applications – from asset, identity

management and authentication, through to event management applications. "There are no modules that need to be purchased, no programming required. This is very important for organisations that have spent years customising and buying modules from the legacy vendors. Organisations today are busier than ever, focusing on their core business. They need products that can work quickly, without protracted engagements. This is what LiveTime provides."

Finger of blame

Don Page, CEO of Marval Software, is very positive about the health of the market, saying there are some great products out there. "I would say it's the user/market observers who are bland. If they spent more time identifying how they can improve their service and management of their IT and service infrastructure, they would improve far quicker."

IT SERVICE TECHNOLOGY: THE FUTURE

End user self-service portals and seamless integration with mobile devices are the key directions for IT service technology moving forward. Increasingly, people want to be able to access services and support when they want, where they want, through whatever technology and media interface they use on a day-to-day basis.

That is the view of Tony Probert, European managing director, Cherwell Software: "This is going to create management problems for our IT professionals in trying to manage such a diverse technology infrastructure, but ultimately the end user will win out, if the business benefit can be justified."

Therefore, the developers of IT service software solutions need to provide systems capable of delivering customisable, user-friendly, content-relevant web portals, and easy integration with smart devices and social media interfaces. "Just because IT might view such innovations as problematic

and difficult to manage, if an organisations end user community or consumers can justify the demand, then they will have to find solutions capable of delivering the required services," he argues. "After all, IT is there to serve the business, not to act as a business prevention unit. Obviously, there is a raft of other considerations; but, given that these can be addressed, then the users will get what they want."

The IT service technology solutions of the future must be capable of provisioning services via web portals, using any browser technology, enabling end users to access the business services they need and empowering them to manage their daily working lives, he adds. "An organisation's workforce is becoming increasingly mobile and, if you are dealing with large communities of people – eg, a student campus – then the need to allow access to services and communicate with users has to be enabled via smart devices and social media tools. For example,

the younger generation is more likely to use Twitter for initial communication than email and so the need to provide a seamless integration with such technology becomes a given."

Some people might say that the future of IT service technology is in the Cloud, but this is just a deployment mechanism; it does not deliver the interface technologies that future end user communities will demand, he feels. "Ultimately, people will want access to services quicker, easier and on their terms. Therefore, vendors have to deliver innovative, practical solutions to help IT departments meet the expectations of their users."



Tony Probert: ultimately, the end user will win out.

He cites, by way of example, the writing of a tender with 300 technical questions, but only ten actually relating to the business issues they need to address. "Customers let themselves down by letting the technical teams drive their requirement, rather than involving business users and service staff."

So, what makes Marval's own service desk solutions stand out from the crowd? "Marval MSM is a truly integrated IT service management tool; it contains years of practical experience. The Marval MSM v12 toolset is truly a 100% web-enabled solution, based on the latest ASP.net technology. Also, we have chosen to accredit our toolset and Marval as a company against industry best practice and standards [all the Pink Verify processes (15), ITIL gold Swirl and ISO20000 accredited]."

When it comes to innovation, he adds, essential ITSM features and processes are standard in the toolset, with no programming, while upgrades are painless – "and it is the fastest 100% web based solution on the market", he claims. "SD staff can spend their time improving the service and not building it."

And while SaaS forms part of the Marval offering, it isn't right for everyone, Page cautions. "It has long been an industry buzzword, but is the delivery method really suited to the highly service-centric ITSM market? Consumers think SaaS takes the service management responsibility away from them; it does not – in fact, it brings it even more into focus. SaaS works out more expensive for a long-term solutions – and why would anyone want a short-term in IT service management?"

What of the future? "Marval customers are asking for greater financial and resource accountability and governance," he says, "in order for them to better demonstrate to their organisation, stakeholders and customers that they add value, are flexible and can support their business moving forward."

Below the surface

Chris Lovesey, marketing manager, NetSupport, is of the view that customers



NetSupport DNA: Enables you to manage the TCO of IT assets

certainly aren't wanting for choice in the current market. "But maybe, when they scratch beneath the surface, products aren't offering enough answers to the current challenges being faced by the modern IT support team. Maybe they lack specific functionality and the flexibility to support the diverse range of platforms and physical assets currently dominating the IT landscape. Or, given the current economic climate, perhaps the anticipated ROI isn't being realised within acceptable timescales."

Customers let themselves down by letting the technical teams drive their requirement, rather than involving business users and service staff.

Don Page, CEO, Marval Software

NetSupport's answer to these challenges is to offer a range of complementary service desk solutions that can be bought standalone or, as seems to be the popular choice at the moment, bundled together in a more cost-effective and added value package. This model has several advantages, says Lovesey, the obvious ones being the ability to tailor functionality to meet specific needs and cost.

"An ITIL compliant service management solution would probably be high on the agenda for most organisations. Our own

offering, NetSupport ServiceDesk, delivers the expected functionality, in terms of incident, problem and change management, but has the advantage of being web based, so is easily implemented within any existing IT infrastructure and requires little or no operator/ end user training. The benefits therefore start to be realised almost immediately. Automated workflow processes, auto email processing, prioritised fault lists, auto escalation of incidents, real-time management reports and a 'solution search' option are typical of the features you should expect, all designed to help service teams deliver a more responsive service."

These solutions are fine for tracking, managing and keeping the end user informed, of course, but today's service desk technician's, particularly at the SME level, need to multi-task and, as such, rely on a mix of software tools. This is where the 'bundle' approach works for customers, he points out.

"IT asset management [ITAM] is another key discipline for today's enterprises and, if informed purchasing decisions are to be made, a solution that delivers a real-time inventory of IT assets is a must. Adding NetSupport DNA to your service desk bundle enables you to manage the TCO [total cost of ownership] of your IT assets. Powerful hardware and software inventory gives you the information you need to make those informed decisions about upgrades, the rollout of new technology or the retirement of unused assets. Crucially, software inventory ensures you comply with ever-tightening software compliance regulations." ■