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General Information

April 2, 2004 • Vol.26 Issue 14

Page(s) 20 in print issue

A Brain Transplant For Your New PC

Are PC Migration & Transition Products Right For Your Network?

Few things can brighten up a corporate data-cruncher's day like having a tired, old computer replaced with the latest speed demon from Intel or AMD. But whether it's a single system being upgraded or a company-wide refresh cycle, getting that new hardware loaded up with the OSes, applications, and user data the employees need to do their work can be a real headache.

In days of old (circa Win98), things were fairly straightforward. Using a tool such as Norton Ghost, you simply copied over an image of the old computer's drive onto the new one, rebooted the system, installed a few new drivers if needed, and you were back in business.

Unfortunately, with the advent of more complex licensing schemes for OSes and more complex device integration, simply cloning a drive is unlikely to generate the desired outcome for an OS such as WinXP or Server 2003. In order to gracefully migrate a system installed with one of these OSes, more sophisticated software is needed. Although tools such as Ghost work fine for installing the same OS and software suite on homogeneous hardware with a site license for everything, as soon as there's variation in hardware or software deployment, things begin to get sticky. For example, you're going to run into trouble trying to deploy the same drive image onto both desktop and notebook systems.

To begin with, the most recent Microsoft OSes automatically detect if too many things change at once (new hard drive, motherboard, graphics card, etc.) and will invalidate the current licensing, requiring the license to be reactivated by a call to Microsoft. This may be a minor nuisance, but it will require digging out your original license number (if you can even find it).

In addition, according to Martin Reynolds of Gartner Research, the copy protections that Microsoft put in place to prevent software piracy can render a cloned machine useless if the hardware has changed to any great extent. "Windows 2000 was actually very interesting in that it had something that we haven't really seen before or since, which is that the operating system was almost self-healing. If you took a Windows 2000 disk drive and just put it into a new PC, by and large Windows 2000 will kind of figure out what's there and load up and run it. Windows XP doesn't do that. If you move an XP drive from one system into another system, it may never work again."

In short, there is no sure way to move or install your entire OS and applications from one PC to another, at least for modern versions of Windows or if the hardware differs at all from machine to

machine. At a minimum, you may need to reinstall the OS on the new hardware before you can move over applications and data.

■ Tools To Help You Move

There are products from such companies as Tranxition, Altiris, and Miramar Systems that offer to back up and restore your application data in place. The basic difference between the various tools is exactly what they back up and restore. For example, Tranxition offers PT Pro (Personality Transition Pro), which is designed to migrate specific business-related applications data from PC to PC. Sioux Fleming, director of product management marketing for Tranxition, says that PT Pro works best in a business environment where home user applications (such as Quicken, which PT Pro doesn't support) are not used. PT Pro concentrates on about a dozen of the most critical business applications and on making it easy for corporate IT staff to create scripts to automate the process of transitioning systems. This means that the same OS and suite of software can be installed on numerous machines with a single operation.

Similarly, Desktop DNA from Miramar Systems concentrates on focused support of a specific suite of applications. Unlike PT Pro, however, over 60 applications are supported including more of the software run on home systems. In addition to a single-user professional edition, an enterprise version is also available, as well as automated OS mirroring and application install tools. PC Transplant from Altiris also supports a wide array of applications (69 according to the company).

Although it may sound tempting to use a product that tries to move applications over in place, to save you the pain of reinstalling applications, Reynolds does not recommend using them. In general, there is no way to avoid reinstalling applications after a move. Although an experienced user might be able to use a combination of drive imaging, registry restoration, and migrations tools to move over applications, it may not be worth the effort. His experience has been that these tools never quite catch everything, and this can lead to an unstable system. Reynolds recommends the tried-and-true approach: Install the OS, install the applications from scratch (perhaps using one of the automated tools), and move over your documents and data. ■

by James Turner