

July

2018

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How Does Virtualization Improve Business?

Truly understanding the ins and outs of virtualization is not for the faint hearted. It's a complicated field that is constantly evolving, but one thing mostly remains the same: its benefits. Read on for a simple recap of just a few of virtualization's greatest advantages.

More technology uptime

Virtualization vendors use fancy names for the features of their technology, but behind all the technobabble are some revolutionary concepts. Take "fault tolerance" for example. When you use virtualization to pool multiple servers in a way that they can be used as a single supercomputer, you can drastically increase uptime. If one of those servers goes down, the others continue working uninterrupted.

Another example of this is "live migrations," which is just a fancy way of saying that employee computers can be worked on by technicians while users are still using them. Let's say you've built a bare-bones workstation (as a virtual machine on the server), but you need to upgrade its storage capacity. Virtualization solutions of today can do

that without disconnecting the user and restarting their computer.

Better disaster recovery

Data backups are much simpler in a virtualized environment. In a traditional system, you could create an "image" backup of your server — complete with operating system, applications and system settings. But it could be restored to a computer only with the exact same hardware specifications.

With virtualization, images of your servers and workstations are much more uniform and can be restored to a wider array of computer hardware setups. This is far more convenient and much faster to restore compared to more traditional backups.

More secure applications

In an effort to increase security, IT technicians usually advocate isolating software and applications from each other. If malware is able to find a way into your system through a software security gap, you want to do everything in your power to keep it from spreading.

Virtualization can put your applications into quarantined spaces that are allowed to use only minimum system resources and storage, reducing the opportunities they have to wreak havoc on other components of the system.

Longer technology lifespans

The same features that quarantine applications can also create customized virtual spaces for old software. If your business needs a piece of software that won't work on modern operating systems, virtualization allows you to build a small-scale machine with everything the program needs to run. In that virtual space, the application will be more secure, use fewer resources, and remain quarantined from new programs.

In addition to software, virtualization also encourages longer life spans of old hardware components. With virtualization, the hardware an employee uses is little more than a window to the powerful virtual machine on the server. Employee computers need only the hardware required to run the virtualization window, and the majority of the processing takes place on the server. Hardware requirements are much lower for employees and equipment can be used for several years.

Easier cloud migrations

There are several ways virtualization and cloud technology overlap. Both help users separate processing power from local hardware and software, delivering computing power over a local network or the internet. Because of these similarities, migrating to the cloud from a virtualized environment is a much simpler task.

There is no debate about the benefits of this technology. The only thing standing between your business and more affordable, efficient computing is an IT provider that can manage it for you.



Office 365's Apps Get a Revamp

If you're one of the million-plus users taking advantage of Office 365's premium productivity apps, you'll soon notice some changes. Last June, Microsoft revealed that Outlook, Excel, PowerPoint, and Word will be getting a design revamp in the coming months. Here's a preview of what's to come.

Simplified ribbon

The biggest update is with the ribbon, which is a command bar at the top of a window. The new design now has a simpler, cleaner look that gives users the chance to customize the tools they work with most, simply by pinning apps or files to your Windows taskbar. Even though this new ribbon is designed with simplicity in mind, if you don't find it helpful you can still revert back to the regular three-line view.

Some users may already be using this new ribbon in the online version of Word, while Outlook for Windows will receive it sometime this month. However, Microsoft disclosed that they aren't yet ready to roll it out to PowerPoint, Word, and Excel for Windows.

Improved search option

One of the major changes is with the search option in Microsoft Office apps. The developers improved the search experience by using Microsoft graph, so users can now see search recommendations when they move their cursor to the search box. Some have already seen this update take effect, but it won't be available for Outlook on the web until August.

Better colors and icons

To make the overall design more aesthetically pleasing, the colors and icons of every app have been re-vamped, too. They wanted a more modern look crisp and clean no matter the size of the user's screen, which is why they employed scalable graphics. It first debuted on Word before appearing on Excel, PowerPoint, and Works for Windows last month. As for Outlook for Windows and Mac, users can expect the update later this summer.

Office 365 is constantly evolving to benefit subscribers. And to make things even more interesting, users will be chosen at random over the next several months to receive the updates, and Microsoft will gather their reviews to make further improvements. Co-creating new features with customers is something Microsoft truly believes in, so this isn't simply a social media tactic.

So as you hang tight for these coming changes, consider increasing office collaboration by migrating your files to the cloud. Call us today to get started!

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Consider the Security Risks of Your Software

Cybersecurity is an issue that hounds businesses of all types. Sometimes organizations invest in security software without realizing the risks that come with it. Here's why identifying threats before buying cybersecurity products is paramount.

Uncover threats and vulnerabilities

Every business should evaluate the current state of its cybersecurity by running a risk assessment. Doing so is one of the easiest ways to identify, correct, and prevent security threats. After discovering potential issues, you should rate them based on probability of occurrence and potential impacts to your business.

Keep in mind that risk assessments are specific to every business and there is no one-size-fits-all approach for small business technology. It all depends on your line of business and operating environment. For instance, manufacturing companies and insurance groups have totally different applications to secure.

After tagging and ranking potential threats, you should identify which vulnerabilities need immediate attention and which ones can be addressed further down the line. For example, a web server running an unpatched operating system is probably a higher priority than a front desk computer that's running a little slower than normal.

Tailor controls to risks

Instead of spending time and money evenly on all systems, it's best that you focus on areas with high risk. You should address these issues immediately after an assessment, but also put plans in place to evaluate their risk profiles more often.

Assess existing products

Chances are, your organization has already spent a great deal of money on security products and their maintenance and support. By conducting risk assessments more often, you can improve the strategies you already have in place and uncover wasteful spending. You may discover that one outdated system merely needs to be upgraded and another needs to be ditched. Remember, your existing products were purchased to meet specific needs that may have changed immensely or disappeared altogether.

It's much harder to overcome cybersecurity obstacles if you're not regularly evaluating your IT infrastructure. Contact our experts for help conducting a comprehensive assessment today!

Vsphere 5.5 Is Approaching EoL

The deadline is approaching fast—the End of General Support for vSphere 5.5 is September 19, 2018. For those that have been putting off the grueling and expensive upgrade to a newer version, time is ticking. It's understandable why many organizations may be postponing the upgrade, too. New licenses aren't cheap and there are many dependencies between all the moving parts of VMware's super complicated infrastructure stack to factor into your strategy—and budget. Plus, there are many more software-based alternatives available today that enable companies to leverage public, hyperscale clouds that are simpler to use and less expensive than the legacy counterparts.

The consequences of not upgrading from legacy solutions are real

Software upgrades are inevitable, but it's still worth noting the consequences of not upgrading software once general support ends.

While this is hardly news for experienced administrators, once support ends, so do patches and updates that keep critical data safe. In some industries, running an unsupported solution can actually violate regulatory standards, resulting in steep fines. Maintaining legacy solutions can also cause serious integration problems with other—no less critical—components of the overall IT ecosystem down the line. In addition, delaying upgrades can make future (and necessary) upgrades more difficult and time consuming. For example, if a company has fallen behind a few versions, they will be forced to make incremental upgrades to get to the most current, supported version. Finally, new capabilities a vendor introduces don't play well with old versions of the software or other systems.

Automation on the hyperscale cloud: You don't have to be a hostage to legacy solutions

Simply put, there are many alternatives to the complex and expensive legacy virtualization platforms available today. By leveraging the powerful capabilities of a hyperscale cloud like Google Cloud Platform (GCP), and an IT automation, orchestration and management solution like itopia Cloud Automation Stack (CAS), organizations can not only save time and money, but significantly reduce the complexities inherent in managing legacy platforms. Besides, itopia CAS was built from the ground up for Google Cloud, as opposed to legacy platforms which were originally designed to run in on-premises data centers. To date, the core capabilities of CAS enable businesses and IT service providers to:

- Automate provisioning for single or multi-region deployments on GCP
- Configure Windows infrastructure
- Schedule VM instance uptime
- Administer Active Directory environments – users, groups and GPOs
- Manage folders and file shares
- Autoscale RD session hosts
- Automate snapshots for backup and DR
- Manage VM instances for compute, disk and firewall
- Create and manage VPNs for cloud or hybrid use cases
- Manage access control lists (ACL) and user permissions
- Implement AD-based DR
- Manage server-only environments on GCP
- Integrate with Google BigQuery for GCP cost insights
- Integrate with Slack, Zendesk and ConnectWise

In short, leveraging automation and orchestration on a hyperscale cloud is the most cost-effective and simplest way to run a modern business today. It requires no upfront costs on infrastructure and eliminates the need for manual configuration of the cloud infrastructure resources you only pay for when you use them. In fact, Research and Markets estimates that the worldwide infrastructure automation market will reach \$65.48 billion by 2022. It's simply time to reconsider your current upgrade strategy.