The 2011 survey of IT consumerisation trends by IDC revealed that 95 per cent of respondents self-purchased and used technology for work, but interestingly, 70 per cent of employers want to buy standardised technologies for employees. Clearly, whether the IT department likes it or not, the current trend of IT consumerisation is bringing the more current technologies and applications into the business environment. Vincent Smyth, General Manager EMEA, Flexera Software, explains why user-centric technology deployment will soon become the norm.

Employees are expected to be able to work from any location and so utilisation of multiple devices is becoming commonplace. Often staff use personal laptops, tablets and smartphones for work, and so expect consistent access to company applications and data with a good user experience. However, this way of working is raising questions such as: should the IT department support personal devices, should users be allowed to download applications on their devices or be forced to use only corporate-approved applications, and how can an IT department efficiently and effectively manage multiple devices?

IT is a business enabler and hence enterprise IT departments need to shift existing mindsets from provisioning standardised technology to user-centric deployment to ensure that the workforce has access to the right applications, at the right time – irrespective of the devices being used and their location.

However, delivering user-centric deployment poses numerous challenges for IT departments:

- The whole process of software preparation, packaging and deployment for the various devices used, if undertaken manually, is not only very time consuming, but costly and also prone to human error.
- Deployment tools need more technical information (or metadata) about applications to select the optimal format based on the user and endpoint they’re using. Manually identifying this information is time consuming and complex.
- In addition to delivering new applications, typically as a matter of routine, over 30 per cent of applications need to be updated, repackaged and redeployed annually. Given the different types of applications that...
are deployed within organisations this, in itself, is not a small job.

- Software licence management is becoming more complex as virtual applications are no longer tied to the piece of hardware on which they are installed and are easily moveable between endpoints. This can violate licence agreements.
- The application delivery models are numerous – such as traditionally installed applications, virtual applications and those accessed via remote desktop services.

These challenges are compounded as organisations handle application deployments tactically and reactively. Moreover, frequently there is a lack of best practice standards regarding how to address these issues. Further, often new applications tend to be deployed in a decentralised fashion based on specific requirements from different business groups. As a result, there is no continuous process to prepare and deploy applications in a reliable, consistent way and no processes in place to proactively manage the application estate.

A comprehensive application readiness process spanning the following six steps is essential to ensuring a consistent, efficient path to implementing user-centric deployment:

- identify – identify deployed and used applications;
- rationalise – eliminate duplicate and un-used applications;
- assess compatibility – know which applications will install and run on target platform;
- plan – scope, resource, and plan projects;
- fix and package – fix compatibility issues and convert applications to required deployment format;
- deploy – prepare and pass packaged applications to deployment tool.

In addition, the application readiness process crucially helps with testing applications against the multiple technologies to ensure compatibility. As an example, typically only 30 – 50 per cent of applications run Windows XP run on Windows 7 without requiring some modification. A manual approach to installing and testing each application on Windows 7 is extremely time consuming and it is difficult to exhaustively test all the features of applications to ensure that they will work. If applications are not fully tested and all issues resolved, then when deployed they may initially appear to work, but over time, as certain features and functions are used, incompatibilities and issues arise. This reduces the application performance and impacts user satisfaction and productivity. The application readiness process’ ability to automatically fix the majority of application compatibility issues removes the need for deep technical knowledge of compatibility issues.

Once tested, applications must be converted to allow deployment via the various delivery technologies used in a user-centric configuration, such as virtual applications. The application readiness process encompasses automation of this conversion process, and facilitates post-conversion testing, validation and storage of the resulting application packages.

The application readiness approach also enables IT departments to identify exactly what requirements an application may have for specific hardware or software and helps ensure that they are in place before delivering the application in question. For example, an application may require the Microsoft .NET framework or a certain hardware specification to run. The deployment system uses this information along with the configuration of users’ endpoint to decide on the optimal delivery technology for the application and ensures that any other required software is in place.

Availability of this level of accurate application information or ‘metadata’ is essential to successful user-centric deployment; however, it is not always easily accessible. For instance, some data may reside in an application’s installer (i.e. in specific system tests the application runs when installed); some in application’s installation instructions, application vendor’s knowledge base articles, or on the vendor’s website. This makes manually finding the metadata extremely time consuming, but crucial to the success of user-centric deployment of applications.

Given the evolving technology landscape and the changing work environment, it is not long before user-centric deployment becomes the norm. Enterprises need the agility to respond to fast-changing business conditions, competitive threats and customer needs. However, while user-centric deployment offers significant benefits to both system administrators and users in terms of simplified management and ubiquitous application access respectively, preparing and deploying applications in a reliable and consistent manner is a complex exercise. Today, there are automated application readiness solutions on the market that can help enterprises accelerate application testing and migration, reduce IT costs and resource requirements, ensure best practice and increase software deployment success rate – leaving IT staff to focus on the more strategic projects within the business.