

NEC Looks to Build a 'Virtual' Client Network

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The company is offering a new management package called Virtual PC Center, which will combine thin client PCs, servers, a software suite and virtualization technology from VMware.

NEC Corp. of America, best known in the enterprise for its line of fault-tolerant servers, is now looking to offer IT managers a way to control an enterprise's fleet of PCs from the data center to the front office.

At the Gartner IT Expo in San Francisco, NEC will detail an offering called Virtual PC Center, which will combine the company's servers, new thin client PCs, software and virtualization technology from VMware into one complete package.

The underlying theory behind this offering, said Ken Hertzler, the director of Virtual PC Center for NEC, is to offer customers a complete package of hardware and software from a single company instead of leaving it up to IT managers to buy and configure software, hardware and networking from different vendors.

By offering a single management suite of hardware and software, Hertzler said that NEC is addressing both security concerns as well as the total cost of ownership for companies that have to oversee a large fleets of PCs.

"What we saw was a lot of medium and large companies with a large number of PCs to monitor and maintain," Hertzler told eWEEK. "The

cost of maintaining these PCs has continued to go up and it's not just the physical PCs themselves. There's also the cost of the software and then the cost of management and the resources used to maintain the help desk."

In recent months, several IT vendors have offered new products aimed at keeping data, operating systems and applications in the back room, while offering employees access through a thin client machine that can be easily and more affordably managed and maintained by IT administrators.

One example is ClearCube. On April 9, the company launched its Sentral 5.5 software that will work with VMware's virtualization technology and offer customers additional scalability when creating virtualized desktop environment through blades.

Hewlett-Packard, which is also one of the world's largest makers of thin client PCs, offers software to help control access to a company's network. For example, HP's ProCurve Network Access Controller 800 appliance provides a way to verify a device's integrity before giving it access to a network.

The NEC's PC Center has been selling in Japan for about a year and the system will make its North American debut on April 23. Hertzler said that NEC believes that the system will appeal to specific verticals, such as hotel chains, or universities and colleges.

"In the hospitality industry, hotels can equip each room with a thin client but the hotel can also configure the system for virtual pooling since not every one of those PCs will be used at the same time," Hertzler said.

The backbone of the NEC's PC Center is the NEC Express5800 server, which is powered by an Intel dual-core Xeon processor, with clock

speeds ranging from 1.6GHz to 3.0GHz. The company is offering both a 1U (1.75-inch) management server and a 2U (3.5-inch) systems that will control the clients.

The 1U Express5800, which offers 12GB of RAM and a 500GB HDD (hard disk drive), is a dedicated management server. This system will also include NEC's SigmaSystemCenter, the company's management and monitoring software, which will provide the central management and monitoring for the system through one console.

The 2U system, which can be configured to support either 20 or 50 thin clients, is a dual-socket system that comes with either 12GB or 24GB of RAM and either five 73GB HDDs or five 146GB HDDs. These servers work with the SigmaSystemCenter, which sits on top of VMware's Virtual Desktop Infrastructure, to manage all the client workstations and sessions.

Finally, NEC will launch a line of thin client PCs, called NEC100. Like other thin clients, this PC will include a monitor, mouse and keypad for front-office users, but Hertzler added that NEC, along with ServerEngines, a private company, will work to develop a microprocessor called NetClient for the thin client.

This chip will give the thin client better audio, graphics and video capabilities, which will help with applications such as VOIP (voice over IP). Hertzler added that the microprocessor will also deliver a better environment for Microsoft Windows XP. (The company is working to offer the Vista OS later.)

The cost of the software and servers vary from \$19,900 to \$49,500, according to NEC, which is based in Irving, Texas. The price for the servers also includes the licenses for VMware's software. The company will sell the thin clients separately at a cost of \$349 each.

The Virtual PC Center offering is already shipping to customers, according to NEC.

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