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Case Study: A Windows 7 Early Adopter

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Deciding to become an early adopter for Microsoft's new Windows 7 operating system was one of those moments when all of the stars aligned. It was time to replace the hardware at Allen Matkins, and we wanted to improve the efficiency and administration of our technology environment as well as making our lawyers more effective with 24/7 access to mission-critical tools. Windows 7 happened to become available at the right time, and the operating system performed as well as the marketing materials said that it could. Allen Matkins is an entrepreneurial firm by nature so this fact, coupled with our track record of choosing effective early solutions, made it relatively easy to gain firmwide approval.

CHALLENGE: IMPROVE TECHNOLOGY TOOLS WHILE RETAINING OLDER APPLICATIONS

At the start of 2009, Allen Matkins was dealing with several challenges that influenced our decision to upgrade our technology environment for our 500 employees working from seven offices across the state of California. Our goal was to create an environment that would help conserve costs and facilitate more timely service to clients. To support this goal, we recognized the need to improve our attorneys' technology tools while still supporting our older applications that work properly and meet our current business needs.

The majority of our computers were running an older version of Windows; we were using the Windows XP operating system on 130 portable computers and Windows 2000 on 350 desktop computers. The reason why so many computers were still on Windows 2000 was because we were early adopters of previous versions and wanted to maximize the investments we had made in purchasing and deploying them over the years.

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Another challenge we faced was the vast array of specialized applications that our attorneys require for certain cases, practice areas and other specific uses. In many instances, these critical legacy applications only functioned on older operating systems, which discouraged us from making any wholesale upgrades or operating system changes. This reality created additional problems. Having outdated images, for example, meant that restoring a failed computer could take as long as 2.5 hours. Because so many applications had to be installed manually, it could be easy to forget an application, resulting in additional delays for attorneys and an enormous burden on our IT staff.

We also needed to ensure our attorneys could always be equipped to deliver superior client service, which we consider a competitive differentiator for our firm. To that end, we provided third-party options for remote connectivity so that our attorneys could respond quickly to their client needs, wherever they were located. Yet, instead of using the best connectivity method for the location, our attorneys tended to choose the one with which they were most familiar and comfortable. If that didn't work, they'd call us for technical support or opt for time-consuming work-arounds. Both of those options created frustration on the part of our attorneys and unnecessarily consumed valuable time for all parties involved.

SOLUTION: MIGRATE TO WINDOWS 7

In March 2009, we had planned to upgrade our desktop infrastructure by adopting Microsoft Office Professional 2007 and move the 350 desktop computers on Windows 2000 to Windows XP. We did not view Windows Vista as an option for us. Although I had heard positive feedback about the capabilities of Windows 7, we were skeptical about the difference that it could make for our firm. However, after personally seeing the product in action, I told my team that we needed to move to Windows 7 right away.

A few reasons stand out in influencing this decision. First, I believe that Windows 7 can help us enhance our ability to serve clients. By providing our attorneys with a flexible remote access system, we can position them to improve client service worldwide. Doing so can increase the daily efficiency of each attorney to meet client demands and deadlines, and it can eliminate loss of billable time for administrative functions.

The firm also viewed Windows 7 as a solution for improving our professional and support staffs' access to resources. The DirectAccess feature in Windows 7 gives us fast, remote connectivity to corporate resources. We're seeing that DirectAccess is flexible and easy to use and believe that our attorneys will find it easier to effectively connect remotely and get work done. Since DirectAccess can detect user needs, we're planning on time savings and reduced frustration for everyone.

Windows 7's AppLocker feature is also important for better controlling our software. The capability helps us to make sure that our users are kept out of harms way in accidentally loading software or applications that cause their core applications to become unstable.

SOLUTION: MICROSOFT APPLICATION VIRTUALIZATION

Another important solution for the firm is to extend our investment in existing software by running our dated applications in a virtualized environment. For those applications that are too old to work with Windows 7, we're using Microsoft Application Virtualization, where the application layer itself is virtualized, not the entire operating system. This technology is part of the [Microsoft Desktop Optimization Pack for Software Assurance](#) and it enables us to run separate, virtualized versions of up to 30 percent of our applications. Microsoft Application Virtualization is enabling us to continue to gain value from those older applications and maximize our investment.

We will soon be creating and running multiple virtual machines on a single computer running a Windows operating system. Each virtual machine can run a different operating system, such as Windows 2000, Windows XP or Windows 7. This enables our attorneys and professional staff to run our older applications that will not work with Windows 7 and does not force us to replace those applications so we can adhere to our cost containment goals.

THE IMPLEMENTATION TO DATE

As of October, we had a prerelease version of Windows 7 running on 28 computers, nine of which are used by members of our IT department and the rest by word processors and other personnel. We used the [Microsoft Deployment Toolkit](#) to aid in this initial installation and have found that the Windows 7 operating system does an excellent job of recognizing new hardware. The system automatically installs about 98 percent of the necessary drivers, so it takes significantly less staff time to make the computers fully operational. We also will upgrade several server computers to the [Windows Server 2008 R2](#) operating system to take advantage of image multicasting and other advanced features.

We've been pleased by the stability and performance of Windows 7. Our core applications run well on our version of Windows 7 and we anticipate that more of our software will be compatible when we expand our deployment across all of the firm's computers. We waited for the general release version of Windows 7 to broaden use and now plan to utilize Microsoft System Center Configuration Manager 2007 for future deployments and system updates.

System Center Configuration Manager enables us to assess, deploy, and update our servers, clients, and devices across physical, virtual, distributed, and mobile environments so that we can gain better control over our IT systems. It also addresses some of the challenges that we had experienced before the Windows 7 rollout by ensuring that our IT systems comply with our firm's desired configuration state to improve availability for our attorneys along with security and overall performance across Allen Matkins.

BENEFITS TO DATE: COST SAVINGS, IMPROVED EFFICIENCY, REDIRECTED IT RESOURCES

While we are still early in the Windows 7 rollout, we are already realizing benefits. We have eliminated several third-party products, such as those that provided us with remote connectivity options. We expect an annual licensing savings of up to \$60,000.

We are also utilizing energy-efficient features in Windows 7 to conserve energy and realize related cost savings due to Windows 7 improved "sleep mode." We've found that sleep mode recovery with Windows 7 is far more seamless than with other operating systems. Since "waking up" from sleep mode quickly reconnects the computer to network resources, our users currently on Windows 7 are less likely to switch away from the energy-efficient default settings. We're expecting this utilization to continue as the implementation expands for ongoing savings.

Another benefit that we have realized is increased maintenance efficiency. Our IT staff is restoring Windows 7 computers five times faster than before, and the restored computer receives the right applications automatically. This is enabling everyone to get back to work more quickly.

Like most firms, we had to reduce the size of our IT staff in response to the recent economic downturn. Windows 7 is helping us to increase the efficiency of our team and improve their ability to run our firm more smoothly. We now have more time for higher-priority tasks.

As the rollout expands to more attorneys and professional staff, we expect that our users will be able to think less about technology and more about servicing clients. We can see how Windows 7 will increase their efficiency due to better remote connectivity so they can be more responsive to clients.

Frank Gillman serves as chief technology officer for Allen Matkins. Allen Matkins is a full-service law firm that supports clients in a wide range of industries including real estate, financial services, energy and health care.