

Accessible IT for the SMB: Citrix Releases Access Essentials

Abstract

On July 6, 2005, Citrix Systems announced the release of Citrix Access Essentials, a packaged combination of remote application delivery and access control that addresses many of the most significant IT challenges of the small- to medium-sized business (SMB). The simple packaging and elegant combination of functionality, all readily deployed on a single Windows Server 2003 host, extends the values of the Citrix solution that have long had appeal to the SMB, but have often been out of reach due to the complexity of the Citrix product set and level of IT resources and expertise required for support. Out of reach no longer, Citrix Access Essentials offers a valuable alternative to the SMB that often struggles with the demands of maintaining competitive IT. It may also offer value to large, distributed enterprises, when they depend on a network of small or branch offices, extending the comprehensive value of Citrix across a new range of opportunities.

IT in the SMB: All Too Often, a Hobson's Choice

In today's business world, ready access to information resources is a competitive necessity. The availability of business-critical IT systems, applications and information may mean the difference between viability and failure for an essential line of business.

This is no less imperative for the small- to medium-sized business than it is for the large enterprise. The SMB, however, does not have the resources available to a larger organization to assure this level of information availability. It must often rely on off-the-shelf or consumer-grade tools for meeting essential line-of-business needs such as office productivity applications (documents, spreadsheets, email, Web) and customer, contact or activity management. It may be limited in the IT resources it can provision to deliver these tools, with heavy reliance on PCs and mobile systems.

The challenge with this approach to IT is its inflexibility. Applications such as these are typically designed to run on an individual personal system, available only to that system's user. This creates a maintenance burden that scales in proportion either to the increasing size or complexity of the business. It limits the business to a narrow range of applications, and ties them to a number of personal systems. The challenge is compounded when the SMB workforce is distributed or highly mobile. The expense

of long-distance support of IT systems and users often limits how effective the business can be when mobility or geographic presence matter.

Data resilience often depends on centralized backups of a fileserver. Server deployment may also be necessary for essential services such as an email hub. For the SMB, server support may raise additional complications of remote access, and associated concerns such as security. How much, for example, does the SMB's IT staff—whose primary work may often have little if anything to do with IT—need to know about a virtual private network (VPN) in order to set up secure remote access? Can the business rest in the knowledge that remote connectivity is as secure as it thinks it is?

For the SMB, maintaining this approach to IT often presents the business with a Hobson's choice: Invest in strategic business priorities at the cost of maintaining inadequate IT, or take resources away from strategic priorities to provide IT that keeps the business competitive?

A New Solution

For many years, Citrix Systems has been a leader in the field of IT access delivery through innovation in techniques such as remote presentation and secure application access. The virtues of remote presentation and Citrix access management—a single set of applications of any and all sorts, consolidated on a central server, equally accessible to remote as well as local users—have obvious appeal to the SMB faced with the challenges of distributed support of personal systems and unscalable applications.

Unfortunately, the benefits of the Citrix option have too often been out of reach to the SMB, since the maintenance of a Citrix environment has, up to now, required specialized expertise in Citrix remote presentation and access resources, and a server and network environment up to the task of supporting tens or hundreds of users and their needs simultaneously. Sometimes the SMB has looked to alternatives such as Microsoft Windows Remote Desktop Protocol (RDP) clients and associated server-side Terminal Services, but has found that this approach isn't tailored for the SMB. VPN connectivity may need to be added for RDP access to be secure, or access to resources may not be able to be finely grained enough to make sure, for example, that rank-and-file employees cannot access the accountant's books.

This has now changed with the introduction of Citrix Access Essentials. Recognizing the need that Citrix could fill in combining the values of Citrix remote presentation and access delivery with a product designed specifically for the small- to medium-sized business, Citrix has engineered a package that combines the essential features of remote presentation with a simple form factor for deploying remote access tailored to individual needs, all delivered on a single server with a highly streamlined setup that dramatically reduces IT knowledge and support requirements to deploy. In fact, Enterprise Management Associates (EMA) has verified in a trial deployment that Citrix Access Essentials can easily go from out-of-the-box to ready-to-run in as little as an hour or two with minimal pre-deployment preparation, with an underlying Microsoft Windows Server 2003 environment previously installed and configured.

Feature Summary

The Citrix Access Essentials 1.0 package is installed on a single Windows Server 2003 system, with or without Service Pack 1, and includes remote presentation services and access management that constrains access to server-installed applications and resources such as folders, shares and application URLs, to specific user accounts. The distribution of Citrix Independent Computing Architecture (ICA) client functionality is delivered via the Web. Access Essentials clients are simply Web browsers equipped with a one-time ICA plug-in, through which access to Citrix-published applications is enabled via the Web. Web server functionality is integrated with the Access Essentials-Windows Server 2003 platform.

Remote access security can be further enhanced and made more resilient by the combination of Access Essentials with the addition of the Citrix Access Gateway appliance, which insulates the Access Essentials server from exposure to untrusted external networks by placing the remote access delivery platform in a DMZ environment.

The combination of conveniently packaged Microsoft resources including Terminal Services licensing and Active Directory with finely-grained Citrix access control and ICA client reliability delivered via a Web browser enables the SMB environment to more fully realize the benefits of both product sets.

Key Benefits

The ability to deploy essential IT applications and services from a single server enables the SMB to centralize the support of one set of applications which it can make available to all its employees. This assures that critical line-of-business applications are always available, separating them from dependence on individual endpoint platforms such as distributed, mobile or personal computing

systems. This further reduces IT support dependencies on maintaining the most current investments in distributed personal hardware and software operating environments. When applications can be published to a browser accessible from anywhere, the browser itself becomes the endpoint, regardless of the underlying platform. The high flexibility of browsers as secure networking platforms further reduces the burdens of secure remote connectivity, when browser-native Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) connectivity can assure that access remains confidential. The integrated SSL server packaged with Access Essentials can be reliably set up within minutes, with an SSL server certificate being the only outside resource necessary to obtain before deployment.

While the readily deployed availability and maintainability of essential line-of-business applications is the primary value of Citrix Access Essentials to the SMB, small- to medium-sized businesses will also discover that Access Essentials also delivers value in the centralization of IT resources. When a single server can be relied upon not only for data management but for application deployment, connectivity, and virtually all other system resources necessary to enable the business to be “IT-competitive,” the SMB will quickly realize that Citrix Access Essentials can answer a host of its most fundamental IT challenges. The only drawback to this approach is the dependence on a single point of potential failure—but this risk can be readily mitigated through a simple backup strategy, the availability of an additional Access Essentials server—which can be just as easily deployed—or a managed IT service offering made available through a Citrix value-added reseller.

EMA's Perspective

The value of the Citrix solution has long been attractive to small and large businesses alike. The efficiency and manageability of centralized access to information resources has demonstrated its worth in settings from hospitals to branch offices. Often, this has enabled Citrix to reach out to small business decision-makers—such as the health care professionals that routinely use the Citrix environment in a hospital setting. Unfortunately for them—as well as for Citrix—the positive experience of the Citrix solution has not until now been able to be translated into the small office settings where these professionals really need a manageable solution package. It is to Citrix's credit that it has not only recognized a gap it is extraordinarily well positioned to fill, it has also executed very well in producing a product to meet the need.

EMA was initially concerned that the introduction of Access Essentials would require a convoluted installation of a set of complex products which, though having a strong appeal separately, might prove to be difficult in practice to administer as a single package, requiring a level of expertise

more appropriate in the data center environment of the enterprise-class Citrix Access Suite. We have been pleasantly surprised to find that the installation of each component of Access Essentials is well integrated into a single setup functionality, which proceeds with surprising smoothness—even through a mid-setup reboot required to register and bring up installed dependencies—with fewer than expected glitches for a version 1.0 release. EMA encountered only two issues in Access Essentials setup. A stalled Presentation Server installation step required cancellation and restart, but when the stall point was reached during the retry, setup proceeded automatically to completion without further user intervention. A second issue was encountered when a Microsoft Internet Explorer browser on a client PC separate from the Access Essentials server failed to recognize that it had never performed the one-time setup of the persistent ICA client functionality necessary for the browser to function as an Access Essentials client. This issue could have been an artifact of active content control on this browser, however, and was never encountered on other browsers or hosts, even those with Windows XP Service Pack 2 Internet Explorer security enabled. From that point on, access to a wide range of office productivity applications including the Microsoft Office 2003 Professional suite, was enabled on that client host without incident.

It is not only the SMB that faces the challenges of delivering essential IT at competitive cost. Many large, distributed enterprises such as auto makers depend on a network of small- to medium-sized businesses such as independent dealers. Citrix Access Essentials may thus be expected to offer value to certain large enterprises as well as to the SMB. This suggests that, once again, Citrix has been able to capitalize on a focused opportunity—in this case, reaching out with a new solution for the horizontal market of small- to medium-sized businesses—and, as it has done before, may be able to leverage that opportunity to broaden its markets overall. Years ago, Remote Presentation was the seed that grew into a new range of access possibilities for the enterprise, giving Citrix an asset that enabled it to maintain its independence from Microsoft while simultaneously remaining a key partner in an area of strategic interest to Redmond. What Citrix may now do for the SMB—as an extension of its continuing agreement with Microsoft—may turn out to be equally interesting, as Citrix brings enterprise-class functionality to the SMB in partnership with the personal systems leader and perennial challenger in the enterprise.



**ENTERPRISE MANAGEMENT
ASSOCIATES**

Phone: 303.543.9500, Fax: 303.543.7687

www.emasa.com

950.07082005