



User provisioning: reducing help desk load and increasing responsiveness

Neil Chaney of OSM looks at the virtues of centralised user provisioning to reduce workload while reinforcing the help desk as a centre for delegated responsibility

With help desk management being under pressure to cut costs while increasing effectiveness, new ways of looking at old problems need to be evaluated. It is not often that we hear of an application that can both reduce workload at the same time as increasing the contribution of the help desk. That, however, is exactly what user provisioning boasts.

One type of help desk call crops up over and over again - namely that relating to user accounts and passwords. In fact, the help desk call volume associated with password problems is as high as 80 percent of all calls (source: Gartner Group). If we add to this the associated problems of application access and disk share handling, then most support organisations see tasks related to user administration as a major burden.

Indeed, depending on whom you listen to, the annual cost of managing passwords alone for an organisation with more than 1,000 employees can be as much as Euro 200 per employee, or Euro 200,000 per year for the organisation as a whole (source: Aberdeen Group).

Identity Management, which includes user administration, is currently a key area of investment for many organisations. There are several factors driving this - efficiency, security and auditing requirements, legislation, service level improvement and so on - and one of its fundamentals is to ensure that only those users who need to have access to information actually get it. This requires a central repository of authorised user information together with automated, controlled registration and de-registration of those users across the applications.

The class of software available to perform this task is called user provisioning. The good news is that utilising user provisioning software not only improves service levels, security and auditing, but pays for itself within a timeframe that

even jaundiced finance directors would consider good value. Even better news is that the support desk is the best suited department for carrying out this work.

"Identity and access management (IAM) solutions, which can offer three-year return on investment (ROI) in the triple-digit-percent range are becoming essential tools for effective management of user account and access rights information across heterogeneous IT environments, for Web and non-Web applications," said Roberta Witty, Gartner Group

Without user provisioning software, the task of registering and de-registering users normally falls to systems administrators, DBAs and application administrators, for each element of the computing infrastructure. A request to add a new user must pass through all departments and each expert or system administrator will do their bit in registering the user for the software for which they are responsible. The process is time consuming, error-prone and, typically, takes days or weeks to complete with the result that users rarely get immediate access to the business processes essential to their role.

Mistakes are often made in the registration process, due to the complexity of the task and the supply of erroneous information by line managers. Help

Desks get overwhelmed with user administration requests and cannot live up to their Service Level Agreements, and end users get frustrated and become less productive.

User provisioning software centralises the user administration function. Most, like OSM's COSuser (www.cosuser.com) software, work on the principle that the organisation grants access to its applications according to the role that a person plays in their organisation. For example, an individual in the marketing department based in Manchester may require access to the centralised CRM system and the Manchester based email and office server. At its simplest, user provisioning software permits a user's name and department to be entered, his or her role(s) in the company to be specified, and the user provisioning software then automatically registers that individual on every application, database, middleware and operating system instance to which they need access. When they leave, their access can be immediately disabled.

The result is that access to applications is restricted to users who need to have it, and the access is granted at the appropriate level. Leavers are removed immediately. Links through to a corporation's Human Resources system are common for authorisation. The level of automation removes a huge administra-

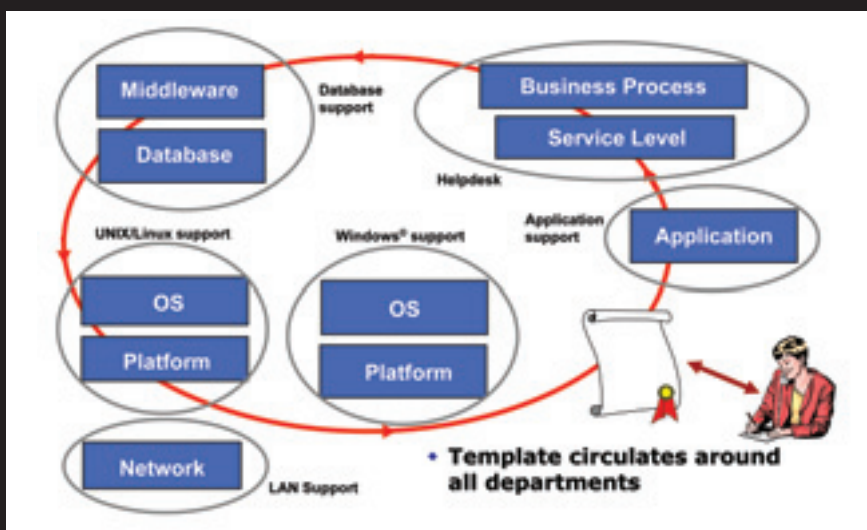
tive cost burden from the organisation, and allows new employees to be productive as soon as they join the company, rather than having to wait days to be set up across all the different applications they need to do their job. Actions which cannot be automated are normally delegated from the administrators to help desk as there is no longer a need for the administrators' specialist technical skills.

Sounds good? Well it gets better. The central repository of authorised users then allows other benefits to be layered on top. Password synchronisation, for example. Depending on the organisation's policies, a user making a password change in one place can have that password propagated to all their applications. This means only one password to remember, which in turn means less help desk calls.

Web browser based workflow engines are linked through to the software so that end users can easily request new accounts, passwords or shares, and have those requests routed automatically to the appropriate line managers for authorisation, before being committed to the system. This offloads the help desk, so producing significant efficiency gains, enfranchises the end user and improves service. Challenge/response mechanisms are built into the workflow to emulate help desk functions. For instance, a user forgetting their password can access a web browser that will provide them with any number of personal questions relating to their identity, and which need to be answered correctly before automatically granting a new password.

According to Gartner Group, an organisation with 10,000 users can save 6,500 help desk hours per year, in addition to twice that in administration hours saved. So what is the catch? Well there isn't one really, provided that you take a process-led approach to the project. If you do this, and pick the right vendor, then you can enjoy the benefits that are driving user provisioning forward as one of the fastest growing sectors of the industry. SW

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A Change Request's Journey Round The IT Organisation