

Technology Infrastructure

Butler Group Subscription Services

Server-based Computing

TECHNOLOGY AUDIT

visionapp

Access Portal and Platform Management Suite 4.0

Abstract *The visionapp Platform Management Suite and Access Portal are solutions designed to address the requirements of organisations adopting enterprise-wide server-based computing strategies. While the visionapp Access Portal provides a robust, reliable, and customisable access point for terminal server-based applications, the visionapp Platform Management Suite provides the IT department with a set of tools designed to address server provisioning and administration. Access Portal functionality can be embedded within an existing corporate portal, and enables users to organise their applications in a way suited to them. The Platform Management Suite provides the IT department with the tools and utilities to automate the complete installation and configuration of terminal servers, thereby reducing considerably the likelihood of human errors. While the visionapp Platform Management Suite complements current Citrix and Microsoft tools, Access Portal provides an alternative to the Citrix 'Program Neighbourhood.' Organisations embarking on a server-based computing strategy should evaluate these products through a visionapp partner.*

KEY FINDINGS

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| ✓ Fully automated installation and configuration of Windows terminal servers. | ✓ Fully automated configuration of complex Citrix server farms. |
| ✓ Complements offerings from Citrix and Microsoft. | <i>i</i> Products tried-and-tested in the banking sector. |
| <i>i</i> Increases administrator to server ratio to around 1:60. | X Database restricted to Microsoft SQL Server. |

Key: ✓ Product Strength **X** Product Weakness *i* Point of Information

LOOK AHEAD

The server-based computing market will continue its rapid growth over the next two years as more IT managers consider this technology as an antidote to spiralling PC support costs. visionapp plans to integrate its product offerings into a single framework – visionapp Control Manager – by Q205.

► FUNCTIONALITY

The humble PC is seen by many IT managers as being the root cause of their on-going battle against spiralling IT support costs, and as a harbinger of doom where security issues are concerned. Yet how many organisations could run their businesses without the many applications which run on these machines?

Were we to have believed the rhetoric that emanated from certain quarters a few years ago, then the days of the 'Wintel' desktop would now have been over, and yet nothing could be further from the truth – PC sales are booming and Microsoft continues to post huge profits from the sales of its latest Windows operating system and desktop productivity tools. So while the general direction of application development may well be towards Web-based architectures, enterprise and line-of-business applications are still, for the most part, based on so-called 'fat clients' and client-server architecture.

In the mid 1990s a company came to the market with a product that would eventually find its way into over 90% of the Fortune Global 500; more than 250 government agencies worldwide; all of the 'Big Ten' US universities; and all of the top US and European banks, telecom companies, and healthcare organisations. The company was of course Citrix, and the product was WinFrame – better known today as Citrix MetaFrame Presentation Server.

While the Citrix product line has continued to develop and evolve over the years, the original technology is now an integral part of Microsoft Windows – going under the name of Terminal Services. When a user runs an application on a Windows 2000 Server (or Windows Server 2003) configured to support Terminal Services, application execution takes place 100% on the server, and only keyboard, mouse, display, and audio information is transmitted over the network. Each user sees only his or her individual session, which is managed transparently by the Windows operating system, and is independent of any other client session.

This method of application delivery is now known as Server Based Computing (SBC), and enables organisations to deliver the latest Windows applications to any mainstream client device, including PCs, Windows-based terminals, Linux-based terminals, Windows CE-based terminals, Macintosh computers, and UNIX workstations.

The business and IT benefits of this computing architecture are many and varied, but some of the key ones are:

- Reduced IT management and support costs through centralised application installation, administration, and support.
- Improved security, availability, and business continuity through the use of relatively unsophisticated and inexpensive thin client terminals.
- Quicker roll-out of enterprise applications and office applications, leading to faster Return On Investment (ROI).
- Line-Of-Business applications can now be deployed to users in environments or situations where a traditional PC would be either too expensive or inappropriate.

Proponents of SBC believe that this model delivers the 'best of both worlds', enabling organisations to deliver and exploit the latest Windows applications and desktop operating systems through a more manageable and cost-effective terminal environment. However, we all know that there is no such thing as a free lunch in the world of IT, and while SBC does indeed remove complexity and cost from the desktop, in reality it merely transfers it to the data centre. So now the challenge faced by organisations embarking on a SBC strategy is how to reduce cost and complexity in the data centre – this is where visionapp's products come in.

Product Analysis

Secure and reliable access to corporate applications is important for all organisations, but for some businesses this has always been a fundamental requirement. The finance and banking sectors in particular present a number of challenges for IT managers seeking to deliver a large number of PC-based applications in a secure and reliable manner, as typically these businesses employ thousands of people distributed over a geographically dispersed area. Now that SBC solutions like Citrix have matured into a viable alternative to traditional desktop application delivery methods, the IT department has to address the challenges of hosting tens-of-thousands of user application sessions in their data centres.

An organisation with 40,000 employees or so is likely to require hundreds of terminal servers in order to support the users' application requirements, and while Microsoft and Citrix provide some of the tools and utilities required to manage huge terminal server farms once they are up and running, the visionapp **Platform Management Suite** enables organisations to automate the actual installation and provisioning of these servers. The suite consists of visionapp **Platform Manager** and a number of add-on tools and utilities that have been designed to significantly reduce the overall administrative and operational burden of any large terminal server environment. By integrating and automating the functionality of leading products from other vendors – such as PowerQuest and NetSupport – visionapp can help organisations to reduce the Total Cost of Ownership (TCO) associated with the commissioning, maintenance, and operational management of terminal servers.

Combining the visionapp Platform Management Suite with software distribution technologies also enables IT departments to optimise the remote deployment of terminal servers in situations where WAN links between remote office and data centre are not considered suitable for SBC traffic.

The visionapp Platform Management Suite is the only SBC tool to be focused on large-scale Windows Terminal Server management, and as such the company has very little competition in this market; however, the company's product strategy is very much tied to those of Microsoft and Citrix – leading to speculation that the long-term future of visionapp may well lie with one of these two companies.

The company's other product, visionapp **Access Portal**, is focussed purely on application delivery and not content. Designed primarily for organisations with a need to deliver a large number of 32-bit Windows applications to a large number of users in a SBC environment, Access Portal offers useful multi-language capability along with a customisable interface. Administrators can elect to give users the rights to change or modify their own favourites, Web links, language, and ICA client setting. By providing users with the ability to customise their view of the portal, organisations can overcome some of the user objections often associated with SBC and the introduction of a locked-down desktop.

Built on Microsoft's .NET technology, the visionapp Access Portal simplifies and centralises application delivery, and ensures that only applications authorised for use outside of the corporate firewall are indeed available – a feature Butler Group believes will become increasingly important as corporate security managers seek to control which applications are made available to employees whilst away from the office.

At the time of writing, visionapp only supports the Citrix Independent Computing Architecture (ICA) protocol, although seamless access using Microsoft's Remote Desktop Protocol (RDP) is not far away according to company officials.

visionapp's SBC management solutions are designed to fill the gap currently left by Microsoft and Citrix. Butler Group believes that the SBC market will continue to grow significantly over the coming years as organisations continue to seek a reduction in desktop support and application deployment costs.

visionapp's products will be of great interest to Application Service Providers (ASPs) and IT outsourcing companies, as they re-consider SBC as a viable service business model.

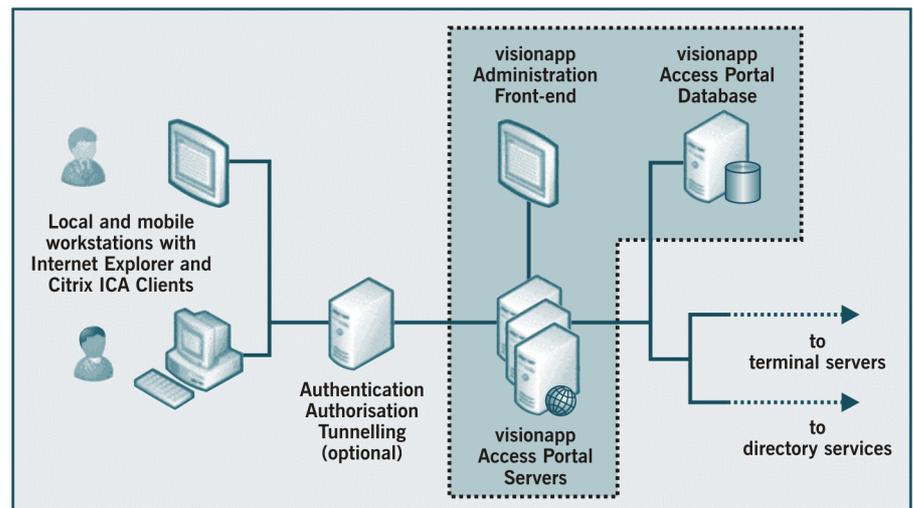
The tools and management products developed by visionapp came about through necessity as its parent company, Dresdner Bank AG, rolled-out a SBC solution to over 5,000 users – an indication that Microsoft and Citrix need to work more closely with customers in order to address some of the challenges confronted by organisations committed to rolling-out large Terminal Server farms.

**Product Operation
Access Portal**

The visionapp Access Portal is focused on application delivery and not content, and is well suited to those organisations that have yet to adopt a corporate portal strategy. Based on technology now found in Microsoft SharePoint Portal server, Access Portal can be integrated with the SAP Portal as a portlet. Although visionapp's plans to integrate with other enterprise portals are customer-led, the company is confident that its technology can be integrated with main-stream enterprise portals.

Access Portal consists of several components, which when combined together enable the creation of a personalised user access point for applications running on terminal servers. A Web-based application, the product enables organisations to integrate Web and Windows-based applications through a user-customisable browser interface.

The process logic behind Access Portal is supported by Microsoft .NET technology, and is written in a combination of ASP.NET and C#. By leveraging Microsoft's latest technology, visionapp has developed a solution which can scale to support tens-of-thousands of users.



visionapp Access Portal (Source: visionapp GmbH, 2004)

Access Portal can be used by organisations as a replacement for the Windows desktop or the Citrix Program Neighbourhood. Based on a hierarchy, the portal presents application icons through structured Web pages and 'index cards.' Although the structure and arrangement of these icons is primarily managed centrally, users can be given the rights to re-arrange these should this be a requirement. Because application program groups are administered centrally, users can instantly be given a new set of application icons if they were to change department or function.

Organisations that have adopted divisional branding can customise the look-and-feel of Access Portal without having to worry about the underlying portal logic. This feature is a direct result of using ASP.NET; whereby program logic and presentation formatting can be easily maintained as two separate entities.

The portal also supports multilingual capabilities, and so is well suited to use within a multinational company. This feature also benefits those organisations where employees tend to move around or visit other parts of the business in different countries.

By integrating applications alongside business procedures, Access Portal can be configured to provide users with everything that they need to carry out their role, thereby accelerating the learning curve, typically experienced by employees when they join a new company or change departments.

Access Portal can be integrated with single-sign-on solutions, and user information stored within the portal database can be programmatically accessed if required.

Access Portal is a tried-and-tested product, and is currently being used within some of the largest terminal server environments. In a SBC environment availability is crucial – as no terminal server means no work gets done – and so the product has been designed to withstand and work around a wide variety of real-life scenarios – including a number of unusual and abnormal load patterns for example.

As one would expect, the Access Portal works seamlessly with Citrix products such as Citrix MetaFrame XP Presentation Server, Citrix Secure Gateway, Citrix MetaFrame XP Web Interface, and Citrix NFuse 1.7 or higher.

The investment bank heritage is also clear to see, as Access Portal supports 128-bit encryption and a variety of security products and protocols including: Secure Socket Layer (SSL), Internet Protocol Security (IPSec), Hypertext Transfer Protocol over Secure Socket Layer (HTTPS), Simple Object Access Protocol (SOAP) over HTTPS, Lightweight Directory Access Protocol over SSL (LDAPS), and Encrypted SQL.

Butler Group is pleased to see that visionapp recognises the importance of single sign-on in its solutions; with Access Portal able to integrate with a number of authentication and authorisation services.

Scalability of the visionapp Access Portal is addressed by a combination of stateless front-end Web servers and the Access Portal database (Microsoft SQL Server). The session states of all user sessions are maintained within the database (which may be clustered using an additional third party tool), and the load-balancing features of Windows 2000 Server can be used to scale-out the solution.

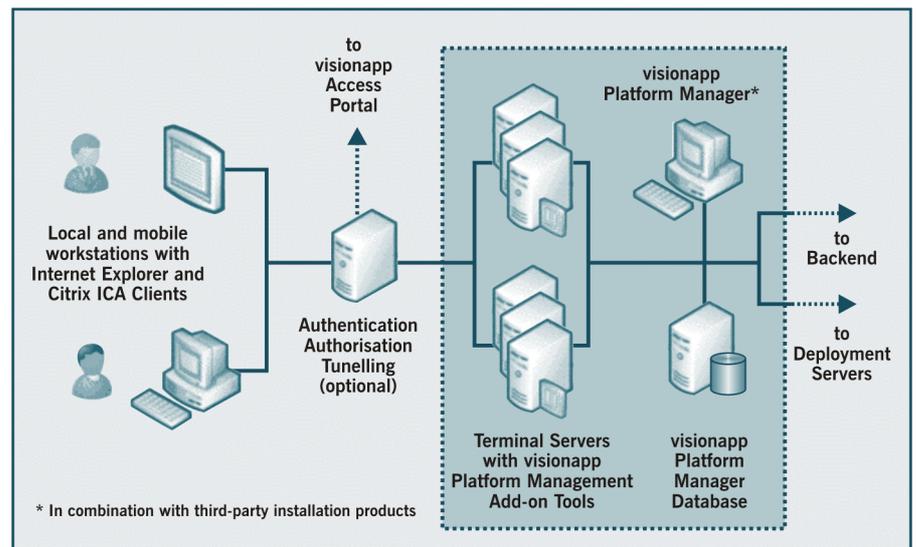
visionapp has engineered a feature in Access Portal to ensure availability of service for an organisation's most important users, wherein the behaviour of the portal changes under periods of abnormally heavy load. Depending on a previously defined hierarchy of users, only the organisation's most important users will see the requested Web pages, with others receiving a standard message telling them to try again in a couple of minutes. This behaviour – which must be initiated manually – prevents the Web servers from buckling as a result of a denial of service attack or some other extreme server loading condition.

Product Operation Platform Management Suite

The visionapp Platform Management Suite consists of Platform Manager and a number of Platform Management add-on tools. Developed out of necessity, these tools enable the complete automation of a Windows terminal server build. By automating the build and configuration of complex terminal server environments, the visionapp Platform Management Suite enables IT departments to aggressively follow a SBC strategy without having to dedicate expensive resources to every terminal server that needs to be built – an option not particularly attractive to IT managers when hundreds of terminal servers may be required to support tens-of-thousands of users.

Organisations planning large-scale SBC deployments will find the optional snap-ins for administration, reporting, and monitoring extremely valuable. The administration model afforded by the visionapp Platform Management Suite is equally suited to organisations consisting of multiple business units as it is to a single enterprise.

Large organisations typically have very dynamic computing resource requirements linked to specific periods of market activity, and so it is very important to be able to dynamically re-allocate these resources in times of peak demand. In a traditional host environment, physical servers are often logically partitioned in order to accommodate the different resource requirements brought about by the peaks and troughs common to many businesses, and although visionapp's Platform Management Suite does not yet provide this level of sophistication, it does provide a drag-and-drop interface which enables system administrators to move terminal servers between MetaFrame farms and zones. Combined with the automation capabilities described earlier, this feature facilitates the reconfiguration of terminal servers within hours rather than days.



visionapp Platform Management Suite (Source: visionapp GmbH, 2004)

The visionapp Platform Management Suite delivers its full capability when combined with network software distribution and management products – such as NetInstall – for the installation of the terminal server platform and the applications, and although licensing restrictions do not permit visionapp to supply compiled software distribution ‘packages’ for their clients, the company does offer templates designed to help terminal server administrators automate the build of these software distribution packs. visionapp is also able to offer consulting services in this area – a service likely to save organisations a great deal of time and money as they avoid ‘re-inventing the wheel.’

The twenty or so add-on tools which ship as part of the Platform Management Suite augment the features and functionality provided by Platform Manager, making it possible to automate the complete installation processes of a terminal server together with its applications.

Product Emphasis

Platform Management Suite is undoubtedly visionapp’s primary offering, with much of the company’s effort and development resources going into Platform Manager and the numerous add-on tools. The company is confident that Access Portal functionality can be seamlessly embedded within other portal products – Butler Group agrees with visionapp’s view that the world does not need yet another portal product.

There is a growing market for tools to manage large SBC farms, and visionapp appears to have the most extensive range on the market right now; however, the company does not currently address two other important areas of management, namely, application performance management and network performance management. Butler Group believes that these are two very important areas, and must form part of any large-scale SBC management solution.

► DEPLOYMENT

visionapp products are installed either by the company's system engineers or SIs that have undergone product training. Butler Group would expect these engineers to be both Microsoft and Citrix certified.

According to visionapp, pilot installations can usually be up-and-running within a week, with large-scale deployments of 150 or more terminal servers taking upwards of 80 man-days.

On-going administration of the visionapp products can be performed by suitably trained IT personnel, and the company offers both 'Basic' and 'Expert'-level training courses to ensure that organisations have the necessary skills in place before product hand-over.

Product support is provided through a telephone hotline; with a process in-place to rapidly escalate serious problems to visionapp development and testing teams.

The product dependencies for the visionapp products are as follows:

- **Access Portal** – Microsoft Windows 2000 or Windows Server 2003; Microsoft Internet Information Server 5.0 or 6.0; Citrix NFuse Classic 1.7 for MetaFrame coupling; Microsoft .NET Framework 1.1; Microsoft SQL Server 2000; Microsoft Internet Explorer version 5.5 or above; 32-bit Windows ICA client version 6.20.985 and above, or Java ICA client version 7.0 and above.
- **Platform Management Suite** – Microsoft Windows 2000 Server with SP3 or above; NetSupport NetInstall 5.5.4 or higher; a partitioning tool such as PowerQuest Volume Manager 3.0 or Gdisk from Norton Ghost; access to a terminal server with Citrix MetaFrame XP Presentation Server (Feature Release 2); access to Microsoft SQL Server 2000 (SP3); and Microsoft Data Access Components (MDAC) 2.7.

Butler Group believes that adopting a SBC strategy will fundamentally alter the balance of IT support within an organisation, with much more emphasis being placed on server, network, and operations management; so IT departments must re-train their desktop technicians if they are to deliver IT services based on this technology – failure to do so will undoubtedly result in very costly mistakes.

► PRODUCT STRATEGY

To-date, visionapp has gained most of its experience in large-scale financial sector projects; however, the products and services offered by the company are equally suited to any organisation running 20 or more terminal servers.

Organisations engaged in application rationalisation and consolidation projects are a key market for SBC in general, as are businesses seeking to provide secure and reliable remote application access to corporate applications. visionapp's partnerships with Microsoft and Citrix will undoubtedly guide the company's product strategy in the short to medium term, and so Butler Group does not expect to see any significant overlap in product functionality as a result.

While visionapp operates a direct sales model in Germany, elsewhere the company engages through partners such as Fujitsu, Siemens, and Citrix. The company also maintains technology partnerships with Microsoft, AppSense, NetSupport, and PortWise.

In a recent proposal for an organisation with 4,000 users and 200 terminal servers, visionapp quoted a price of €280,000 for Access Portal and the OEM version of Platform Manager, and split approximately 70/30 between software and services.

► COMPANY PROFILE

visionapp was created out of an internal Dresdner Bank technology project called “starship” which deployed a server-based solution to 3,500 Corporate Banking users in Germany. visionapp is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Dresdner Bank, and became a limited company in 2002. Headquartered in Frankfurt, Germany, the company employs around 90 people, and has additional offices in Karlsruhe, Munich, Hannover, and London.

visionapp’s client base is predominantly German, with the company counting amongst its customers: Deutsche Bank, DaimlerChrysler Bank, Bayerische Landesbank, BW Bank, and Finanzgruppe. visionapp has approximately 20 customers currently using its products, and a total customer base of around 60.

► SUMMARY

Industry figures suggest that the SBC market is growing by more than 30% per annum, and although the number of users accessing applications via a thin client device is only a tiny fraction of the PC market, Butler Group expects this number to grow rapidly over the next two years. Much of the success of this market will undoubtedly depend on the efforts of industry giants Microsoft and Citrix; however, smaller companies such as visionapp will be crucial to the overall acceptance, and ultimately the success, of SBC. visionapp’s products clearly have a part to play in the deployment and ongoing management of large-scale terminal server farms, and organisations embarking on a SBC strategy would do well to evaluate the company’s products sooner rather than later.

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