Solution-Soft

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Tool Fixes Time-Zone Problem for Windows Servers

By James Cope

(September 04, 2000) Serving up applications from a central data center to terminals at remote offices is standard operating procedure for Kyle Duke, a senior systems analyst at CHD Meridian Healthcare in Nashville. But that doesn't mean it's painless.

Using what Duke describes as an in-house application service provider model, software such as the practice-management system from Physician Computer Network Inc. in Morris Plains, N.J., is centrally managed and piped to remote office terminals. CHD Meridian's central management is accomplished with Microsoft Corp.'s Windows NT Terminal Server and terminal access software from Citrix Systems Inc. in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

Duke's problem: The Windows NT-based application servers housed in Nashville that pushed applications to CHD Meridian offices throughout the U.S. couldn't recognize multiple time zones. For CHD Meridian, that meant offices in other time zones would get out-of-zone time stamps. Those are the times and dates read from the server system clock that are automatically inserted in database files or stamped on documents by applications. In CHD Meridian's case, they're used in applications for physician scheduling, medical procedures and prescription documentation.

"Applications pushed from Windows NT and Windows 2000 servers don't automatically know what time zone the user is in," said David Friedlander, an analyst at Giga Information Group Inc. in Cambridge, Mass. The date issue is an annoyance that most firms that host applications from a central data center simply put up with, Friedlander said.

Microsoft product manager Mark Aggar said his company is aware of the time-zone constraints on Windows NT and 2000 Terminal Servers.

Duke described the time-zone issue as "a recurring problem that kept being pushed aside because of cost." But when Meridian Corporate Healthcare in Nashville merged with Corporate Health Dimensions in Latham, N.Y., last October to form CHD Meridian Healthcare, Duke saw the number of office sites in different time zones double overnight. He said the newly formed company knew then that it really "had to make a move" to solve the date problem.

One option was to set up several server farms, with one farm for each time zone, but that would have been expensive. Duke said that buying and installing each set of 20 servers would have cost about $750,000.

Fortunately for his employer, Duke routinely browses the support forums at Citrix's Web site. "I ran across a reference to a product called Time Machine on one of the forums," he said. "I called for a demo and had it up and running the next week.

"We installed Time Machine on each of our application servers. It runs in the background. Users have a log-on script configured to their time zone. [Time Machine] automatically sets the session to their time zone whenever they log on," Duke explained.

"We were totally blown away when we found this," Duke said. "We installed it, and we haven't

looked back."

A spokesman for San Jose-based SolutionSoft Systems Inc., which developed Time Machine, said that in addition to NT and 2000 Terminal Server, the tool also runs on Unix. But many Unix-based server systems accommodate multiple time zones.

Aggar said it's only in recent months that the time-zone problem has become an important issue with customers. Aggar wouldn't say if Microsoft is working on its own time fix, but he did acknowledge that Microsoft recommends Time Machine and said it may be the only commercial utility available that solves the problem.

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