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JUL 03 2019



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How a Device as a Service Standard Helps Businesses Maintain Mobility

Organizations are tapping into external resources to support their growing number of laptops, phones and other portable devices.



by Erin Brereton

Erin Brereton has written about technology, business and other topics for more than 50 magazines, newspapers and online publications.

Over the past five years, companies have begun embracing Device as a Service, a personal computing device management model that outsources machine and software procurement, deployment and support needs to vendor partners and IT solution providers.

"DaaS encompasses desktop PCs, tablets and smartphones," says Susan Middleton, an International Data Center research director. "You basically have a services-led model that allows you to pay a monthly fee per seat based on the number of devices you're using and the services that are attached to that."

Companies whose business models include a significant number of mobile devices — a bank with tablets for customers to use at its branches, for example, or an organization with a large outside sales force — may find that DaaS substantially reduces its IT department's responsibilities.

Fifty percent of IT managers say they spend too much time managing devices, according to IDC research, and 63 percent believe their time would be better spent on other projects.

"DaaS vendors typically handle solution design, product configuration, solution delivery and deployment, product maintenance and repair, and eventual removal/recycling and upgrades to new solutions," says Charles King, president and principal analyst at Pund-IT. "The vendor takes on 90-plus percent of the work companies previously supported in-house; that allows them to resize their IT organization or have staff members focus on more complex, critical projects."

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DaaS Deployments Increase Security, Reduce Costs

Outsourcing mobile device and software management via DaaS can potentially help with asset tracking and data protection efforts, both of which can be a challenge for companies with tens of thousands of devices.

"If you think about the lifecycle of assets, one of the biggest issues is the back end," Middleton says. "Companies might have a disgruntled employee leave with a device. The services that are bundled can be remotely wiped, so there's no security issue."

Planned well ahead of time, DaaS deployments often occur more quickly and seamlessly than other management services companies handle internally, according to King. This efficient deployment is also often the most cost-effective solution for businesses that, due to upfront cost, purchase new equipment in a piecemeal fashion, potentially complicating already complex IT infrastructures.

"The cost of managing and maintaining device management structures can be a constant drain on resources," King says. "A DaaS solution offers new systems for a fixed monthly, quarterly or annual fee, with deployment, maintenance and repair, and removal and replacement built into the contract."

Not only does this make budgeting simpler and more predictable, it also helps ensure the business and its employees have the quality equipment they need, King said. DaaS can also provide a considerable amount of flexibility for organizations that may experience staff fluctuations or an increased need for employees to work remotely using mobile devices.

"If another company is acquired, you have the option to flex up. Or, if there's downsizing, you can flex down," Middleton says. "It reduces total cost, but it also provides better scalability — those are really the reasons people are embracing Device as a Service."

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DaaS Popularity Grows with Product, Service Diversity

A number of vendors, such as Lenovo, HP and Microsoft, currently provide enterprise-focused DaaS solutions.

The typical DaaS contract runs 24 to 36 months, and customers can frequently choose from a variety of software packages, support levels, product deployment services and other features. "Flexibility is one of the key benefits that DaaS vendors are pitching," King says. "So they are usually willing to find a way to accommodate customers' specific requirements."

DaaS use still seems to be a developing practice — King describes the number of businesses that have implemented it as "fairly modest" — and IDC research indicates organizations haven't been utilizing DaaS long.

"It's still a relatively new model. Most adopters have had it in place for less than two years," Middleton says. "What we've found is there's a lot of interest, but the process just takes awhile. Companies have said they might just start it in one key business sector, and within three years, really scale it up."

In 2016, only 2 percent of the commercial PCs that shipped in the U.S. were part of a DaaS agreement. An IDC report predicts that, by next year, nearly a third of the commercial PCs that ship domestically will be the result of a DaaS arrangement.

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DaaS for Businesses Small and Large

Size isn't necessarily a precursor or a barrier to using a Device as a Service structure. Outsourcing device acquisition and maintenance can offer distinctive benefits for both big and small businesses, according to Middleton.

"We've seen fairly large organizations adopting it just because the lifecycle strategy of managing a huge number of assets can be onerous," she says. "On the flipside, smaller companies might not have an IT support staff and might be looking at it to become more efficient without hiring."

DaaS may not be an automatic fit, though, for all organizations. Ones that tend to keep devices for a long period, for instance, might not view the ability to receive new, potentially state-of-the-art versions every two to three years as a considerable selling point.

"They might keep an asset for five years and think that depreciation schedule is the most advantageous," Middleton says. "You're going to see a variation in terms of what customers want for services and support."

Similarly, some organizations may feel slightly uncomfortable handing off large portions of the device oversight process to a vendor. Companies that have a significant amount of expertise onsite may instead opt to just outsource certain aspects, Middleton says, such as supervising patch management.

"Companies that are more nimble — maybe more in the cloud, that use a subscription-type model — will likely have a much more open mindset to this type of program," she says. "It's important for companies to look at the entire device lifecycle and understand all costs that are part of it. That can help them really evaluate DaaS versus what they've done previously."

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