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Are Macs a realistic option in the SME environment?

by Paul Mew on 28th October 2011, filed under Enterprise



Having transformed from a high quality but niche product, the Apple Mac has now become a desirable and high spec player in the home computing and education marketplaces. And this has helped Apple become a rapidly rising star in the business world, becoming a far more familiar sight in workplaces, well beyond its traditional design and publishing sector domination. But whilst they are undoubtedly popular tools, are Macs a realistic option in the PC-centric SME environment?

Due to their increasing use in the home, more business owners and senior managers are asking for Macs for use in the office, but there are undoubtedly concerns over the practicality of running two largely separate platforms together. As an outsourced IT specialist this is particularly relevant to me and my clients, and so I have been extensively testing the platforms to assess the degrees to which both systems can work in harmony.

Although I'm from a technical background, in looking at the issue I am firmly bearing in mind that a regular user (who has probably got a Mac at home they use for photos, web browsing and e-mail) will be by no means a Mac or Windows expert.

To set the scene, my company is internally a 100% Microsoft environment, just like the vast majority of SMEs. We run Windows Server 2008, Exchange 2010 for e-mail, Microsoft Dynamics CRM, and Microsoft SQL based databases. All desktops and laptops are running Windows 7 and Office 2010. We also run a Citrix server system for remote working.

Personally I run a Windows desktop computer and until recently I also ran a Windows laptop for work. However, my home machines are all Macs as I've been a Mac user for many years – so I have a long history of using both platforms.

My normal work consists of the usual editing of Word, Excel and PowerPoint documents and Outlook for e-mail, plus using our Microsoft Dynamics based CRM system. Then there are the various network tools I use when out on-site managing and supporting systems which are more specialised.



So, in terms of connecting to the office network, on the face of it that's not a problem with a Mac. Internet access is obviously easy, but it's also relatively straightforward to get access to files and folders shared on Windows servers. However, to reach this stage you are going to need someone who understands the networking side, which brings the first challenge.

Most IT people and support companies are quite happy with the Windows world, but many are less happy working with a Mac, as the software is very different underneath the surface. Similarly, most people who've come from a mainly Mac background aren't keen to learn, manage or support Windows systems – in many cases they have an ideological mistrust and dislike of Microsoft products.

Therefore, it can be difficult to find an IT company that will support and manage both the Windows and Mac elements of a corporate network.

Compatibility between Macs and PCs has greatly improved in recent years. I've been using Office 2011 for Mac for a while now and having used various older versions of Office for Mac, I can say hand on heart that the current version really is excellent and seems to avoid all of the compatibility and formatting issues I've experienced in the past.

I've even created complicated PowerPoint presentations with photos, animations etc. on the Mac, and then presented them on someone else's Windows laptop with no issues whatsoever. In fact, I've had fewer issues going from Mac to PC with presentations than I've had in the past going between different versions of PC based software!

Outlook for Mac certainly isn't as polished as Outlook on Windows, with some delays in the send-receive process that can be an issue at times. However the new version of Mail in Apple's OSX Lion does seem to work quite well with Microsoft Exchange 2010. Outlook Web Access is another option for e-mail, but only the 'light' version is available on the Mac, so it offers a more basic user interface.

For other applications it may be a different story, so it's important to make sure you've tested everything before spending the money on a Mac. Again, that is something a good IT support company will be able to help with.

Some applications, in particular ones that are accessed via a web browser, may work straight away. However don't take that for granted. For example, we run Microsoft Dynamics CRM, which is accessed via a web-browser and has no locally installed software, so in theory should work fine.

However it requires components that are only available in Windows, so just doesn't work at all on the Mac. There are also going to be various other applications where software must be installed, but there's no Mac version, in which case you're out of luck.

There are two potential solutions that could help. Firstly, there's Citrix, which allows remote access to Windows applications and desktops on any device. Essentially, as long as you can get an internet connection, even via a smart phone (such as an iPhone for example) then you can run a full Windows desktop on any Mac, wherever you happen to be.

Citrix is an enhancement of Microsoft's own Remote Desktop Services (formerly called Terminal Services), but for Mac users there's an important difference. When accessed via a web browser, Remote Desktop Services uses a component called ActiveX, which is only available on Windows based machines. So, if you're planning on working remotely using a Mac, Citrix really is by far the best option.



Secondly there's a piece of software called Fusion from VMware. You may have heard of virtualization, where you can run several different operating systems on one computer. Fusion is virtualization for Macs, so you can have your Mac as usual running its operating system, OSX, but also run Windows, Linux etc. at the same time.

Personally, I have VMware Fusion on my Mac laptop, I have a Windows PC, and also a Linux machine on there, all of which I can run at the same time and switch between as required.

However, even better than that, I can run individual applications if I want to, rather than having to switch from a Windows desktop to my Mac desktop and back again. I can run Internet Explorer, as if it were a Mac application, which means I can run our CRM system on my Mac.

Likewise, if I wanted to run an accountancy application like Sage, I could have that installed on my virtual Windows PC, and just run the Sage on my Mac desktop. It really does work extremely well.

The icing on the cake is that with Fusion you can just convert your existing Windows PC to a virtual machine with very little effort, so there's no need to set everything up from scratch. I've been through this process and it's literally as simple as installing a bit of software on the Windows PC, making sure the Mac and PC are on the same network (I did mine on my wireless network at home) and starting the process. An hour or so later, I had an exact copy of my old Windows 7 laptop running on my Mac.

There are a couple of things to bear in mind however. Firstly, as you're running two machines (your original Mac, plus your virtual PC) on your Mac, it does need to be a good specification, so it's worth adding some extra RAM. Secondly there are some licensing implications, obviously you'll need a license for VMware Fusion, but you will also need a new license for Windows.

You almost certainly won't be able to transfer the license from your old PC, as they are almost always 'OEM' licenses that are tied to the hardware. So, you'll need to speak to your IT company to ask for both a VMware Fusion license, plus a suitable Windows license.

So yes, it certainly is possible to use a Mac in an SME environment. However you do need to make sure you test the software you're going to be running beforehand, and then make sure you understand the options, costs and implications if there are applications that aren't going to work straight 'out of the box'.