The University of Birmingham Dramatically Improves Provisioning Times Using Embotics vCommander

Challenging and developing great minds for more than a century, the University of Birmingham located in Edgbaston, UK has over 34,000 students enrolled, in graduate and postgraduate programs, and is a founding member of Universitas 21, a group of elite research universities.

Lack of standards led to search for alternative solution

The storage and virtualization team within the university act as an internal cloud services provider to the IT Services support staff, who in turn provide services to the other members of the university, both staff and students.

With a team of seven, the process of deploying virtual machines was becoming a time-consuming exercise. A typical application would be made up of three tiers: consisting of a database server, an application server and a web server. When the team recorded the steps involved in deploying a VM, they found it took approximately seven hours from deployment to handoff. This included such tasks as IPAM registration, adding to Veeam Backup, creating CMDB entries in ServiceNow, and producing a VM configuration report.

"It was at that point we knew we needed to do something a bit better," said Ian McBride, Senior Storage and Virtualization Specialist at the university. "We were using VM templates with guest customization and a variety of post-scripts, different batch files and little things that would help us out, such as renaming a SQL server and default instance."

Some of those processes worked well, according to McBride, but others didn’t. There was no standardization on deployment, so that, for example, VMs were deployed by different team members using different scripts. "That was one of the main drivers that we had to look for an alternative solution," said McBride.

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We just had to make it easier for our internal customers to just consume a resource and then delete it afterward and so that’s what our objective was.

– Ian McBride, Senior Storage and Virtualization Specialist

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When looking at products to automate the provisioning and orchestration of their VMs, the team wanted a very simple, intuitive interface. “vCommander is a much simpler interface to use than other products,” says McBride, adding that users can easily fill out the VM request form with all of the required information. “I think it’s the interface that is what sells vCommander. And so that’s one of the major reasons that we chose vCommander.”

Prior to implementing vCommander, requests for systems would come in via service tickets, emails or phone calls, and invariably, not all the required information was provided, adding delay in deploying systems. Now, by using a service catalog with system blueprint forms, all the information is gathered upfront. Sandbox systems can be provisioned immediately, and production systems requiring an approval workflow are provisioned within 30 minutes.

**Time saving was the biggest benefit**

“Time saving is definitely the biggest benefit that we’ve gained from implementing vCommander,” said McBride. “A lot of us have almost forgotten the manual ways of how we used to do it.” The team also uses vCommander as an access portal for VM connections: vCommander provides the RDP and SSH links to servers and, if a user has permission, direct access to the VMware console.

Integrating vCommander with ServiceNow has also resulted in time savings. vCommander automatically populates fields in the ServiceNow CMDB, so that the team no longer has to enter configuration information manually.

**A simple interface**

With nearly 1,200 virtual machines in the environment, and approximately 90 new VMs being created each month, the university has recently begun to use vCommander for the decommissioning process as well. (Sandbox instances, for example, have a lifecycle of three months before being removed), allowing the IT team to better monitor and manage their environment. “Having fewer manual intervention steps to deploy and decommission virtual machines, along with the simplicity of the interface itself, is what makes vCommander stand out from the competition. And when we do need to contact support, we get a reply in a very short amount of time telling us what our expectations are for that case. I’m super-impressed with the support we get,” concluded McBride.