

There are many mobile device management products, but approaches vary.

As applications have become more mobile-centric and smartphones, tablets and other portable devices have proliferated, IT administrators have looked for a means of performing maintenance on applications and the data they use remotely.

In response, mobile device management (MDM) developed to provide troubleshooting, administration and security functions so that device configuration settings, patches and even a degree of data manipulation can be performed without the device itself being physically present.



The bring your own device (BYOD) trend has of course increased the number of enterprise users that now have mobile access to corporate assets, so encryption and data lock-down has climbed up the IT department's agenda.

Meanwhile, MDM's core value proposition centres on the ability to implement a firm's security, data protection, access control and acceptable-use policies via a reporting function. So given that basic refresher course on MDM, it makes sense to find considerable growth in this sector, as major IT suppliers including Microsoft, Oracle and others seek to ensure they have a marketable offering. By virtue of its acquisition of Sybase back in 2010, we find SAP now redefining its MDM position through its Afaria product line.

A mobile gateway to SAP data

SAP effectively went shopping and got itself a storebought MDM solution through buying Sybase, which directly boosted its own enterprise mobility strategy. There is no blame to be attached to this; Sybase itself bought Afaria from XcelleNet some years ago now. But as SAP now refines and extends Afaria, the firm is being careful to position MDM as a key facilitating tool to extend the use of its own database platforms, now encompassing the breadth of Hana, Sybase ASE, Sybase IQ and SQLAnywhere as they do.

SAP technology evangelist John Strano spoke at an SAP Sybase UK user group meeting in London in November 2012 to urge the professional developer audience in attendance to look to the importance of MDM when developing new applications for the mobile market. "When working with this kind of technology you will need to run some level of mobile device management whether you choose SAP Afaria or one of its competitors. MDM will give you the ability to control administration, deployment and security. But really, I should say that MDM brings administration, deployment and security, security and security - it's that important."

How to do MDM

While SAP is keen to validate the importance of MDM with Afaria, the firm explains that customers should consider exactly how they use the tools on offer and at what level. For example, a firm should not necessarily extend its MDM capabilities to support an additional as yet unsupported operating system if the use of applications on that new platform will bring only limited additional business functionality.

Client management tools manage configurations and support system administration tasks for client devices

Gartner

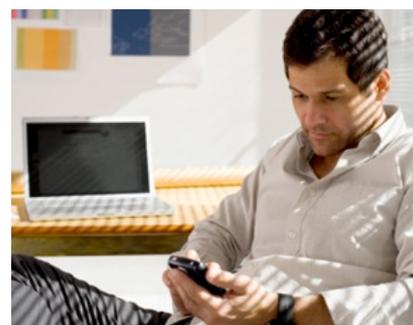
The product has been built to enable mobile management regardless of bandwidth available thanks to an optimisation engine. Applications managed with Afaria have continuous, consistent availability as the management activity itself happens in the background, leaving the user undisturbed.

As well as the more expected functions of MDM – such as the ability to roll out mobile antivirus protection or perform role-based user admin management – there are also options here to tune device telemetry functions and control asset management. Data and content is backed up and can be deleted if a device is lost or stolen.

Updates to Afaria in September of 2012 saw new support for iOS 6 key features and devices. New iOS 6 features include an "Authorised Mode" for pre-loading applications so that IT administrators can remotely instruct a device to enable or disable a particular app, based on user policy compliance or permissions.

SAP mobile division head Sanjay Poonen has explained his company's position of supporting any device from the iPhone 5 to Android and Windows Phone 8 devices.

But does MDM go far enough? Analyst firm Yankee Group asserts that MDM solutions do not necessarily offer businesses the full range of security, policy and compliance features they need to be truly able to manage mobile assets deployed in the corporate environment.



In a report entitled MDM Is Dead. Long Live EMM! the firm states: "Some managed mobile service suppliers are integrating capabilities onto unified platforms, shifting the focus to enterprise mobility management (EMM). This will force a response from all players from across the entire enterprise mobile ecosystem."

Of course SAP is not alone in either the MDM or indeed the EMM market and the firm faces competition from big and small

players alike who are now addressing a delivery model based on software as a service (SaaS). Pushing out MDM via a cloud-based desktop interface is Cortado, a firm that commands a user base of 3.5 million devices deployed in 15,000 organisations worldwide.

Cortado CEO Carsten Mickleit says that his firm's speciality lies in the integration of new devices and technologies. "A solid MDM solution should be able to adapt to all devices and platforms, leverage resources and simultaneously integrate them into back-end systems like file drives, printers and rights management," he said.

A growing MDM marketplace

So SAP's MDM offering is arguably blossoming right now. The firm's opportunity to integrate Afaria with its backbone ERP services (although it prefers the term "systems of record") is extensive. While smaller, possibly more nimble contenders will also now most certainly come forward, the expansive R&D departments of Oracle and Microsoft have been hard at work to produce offerings in this area.

Oracle tends to place its MDM under a Mobile Enterprise Application Platform (MEAP) heading when it explains its "write once, then deploy to multiple mobile platforms and channels" messages. The Oracle MEAP offering itself is not perhaps as extensively documented as those of its competitors from an IT administrator's point of view. The Oracle MEAP offering is more firmly positioned towards software application developers as a platform for future programming support. Microsoft by contrast is, if anything, somewhat more open to a mobile device management landscape that could be quite fragmented. The firm's open message is that most existing MDM tools will integrate with its System Center offering, but that System Center 2012 Configuration Manager exists in its own right to provide tools to help manage mobile devices in an organisation.

According to Microsoft, System Center 2012 is the only unified management platform where you can manage multiple hypervisors, physical resources and applications in a single offering. The firm asserts that its competitors offer only "multiple fragmented point solutions" in comparison. In this product set, Microsoft offers System Center 2012 Configuration Manager and System Center 2012 Endpoint Protection.

These tools exist to provide a means of managing mobile client computing environments on the same infrastructure that exists to protect physical and virtual resources. Without starting a completely new stream of discussion, it is worth noting that some analyst firms will use the term "client management tools" to discuss MDM management software. Gartner's definition is as follows, "Client management tools manage configurations and support system administration tasks for client devices. They are used by desktop support organisations to automate system administration and support functions that would otherwise be done manually. Windows PCs are the primary target of management, but organisations are looking to use these products to manage Macs and mobile devices as well."

Positively disrupting future MDM

Looking ahead, cloud-based delivery of MDM will certainly be a key element of enterprise mobility and firms such as CoSoSys with its Endpoint Protector product for iOS and Android plus Codeproof Technologies with its Mobile Security & Cloud MDM managed service to businesses could shake up the bigger players and disrupt their total platform integration plans. If indeed this is a disruption, it will arguably be a comparatively "positive disruption" as enterprise MDM now adapts to SaaS delivery models. However we choose to define and label it, the future is mobile, the future is cloud and the future needs to be managed.
