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Desktop on a USB drive ready for enterprises

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Software that lets you carry your data, applications and personal desktop around on a USB-attached device is expanding into enterprises.

Startup RingCube Technologies' MojoPac software stores a person's computer desktop image on a USB drive to plug in and run on any Windows computer.

It makes it possible for any company's contract workers, telecommuters and traveling employees to store their desktop software applications, files and network access privileges on a remote hard drive, flash drive, or even an iPod, and connect it through the USB port. MojoPac runs virtually as a guest on any Windows XP or Vista PC without affecting the host computer.

RingCube, a 45-person company in California, is one of just a few companies pursuing this market, although Microsoft is another.

Citrix Systems sells a product that lets IT administrators deliver software applications from a data center to mobile workers, as well as change access privileges or provide software upgrades. But founder, president and CEO of RingCube, Shan Appajodu, said Citrix required a network connection to the computer whenever the employee wanted to use an application.

The applications, settings and access privileges of MojoPac stayed on the portable drive, Appajodu said.

MojoPac Enterprise Edition eliminates the time and expense of configuring every employee's and contractor's computer, vice-president of enterprise business for RingCube, Srihari Kumar, said. Workers can also get the same configuration on their own home computers.

With the user's virtual desktop stored on the USB drive, the software and data were safe in the event a laptop is stolen or a desktop computer was inaccessible, he said.

Ohio University, a school of 28,000 students in Central Ohio, has 50 MojoPac licenses and would have 200 within a month, an IT administrator in the Office of Information Technology, Brad Sayers, said. He had heard about this virtualisation tool, oddly enough, in the virtual world of Second Life.

Some teachers use Second Life to invite students to join them in a virtual classroom. Some students need to use Second Life on university computers, but those systems are configured not to allow Second Life. When the students replace the standard desktop with the one on their USB drive, they can use Second Life.

"We had to find a way to provide a virtual environment to let this one application [Second Life] run without bothering our core applications in our lab computers," Sayers said.

RingCube's solution might help employers serve their increasingly distributed work forces but also to address their increasing security concerns, an analyst with Frost & Sullivan, Gerry Purdy, said.

"Companies today have a lot of remote access needs, and they are also trying to control software and access to systems," Purdy said. "This gives employees access to the applications that they need remotely, but still gives control to IT."

RingCube isn't the only company heading down this path. Microsoft entered into an agreement in May with SanDisk to develop a product to store applications and personal settings on SanDisk USB flash drives. The Microsoft-SanDisk solution is due out in the second half of 2008. VMware said in March it was beta-testing a new version of its desktop virtualisation software that also would allow somebody to carry their virtual desktop on a USB device.