

Case Study

Parallels Automation

COBWEB



Cobweb Solutions deploys Parallels automation to enable and empower future expansion

Looking to the Future

With the platform in place, Cobweb can now concentrate on developing applications and IT solutions that add value for their customers and quickly bring new services to market:

"The immediate challenge is to finish migrating all our existing customers over to the new platform. This will be a gradual process in order to preserve the customer experience and ensure that any teething problems are ironed out quickly and easily. Then we can really start benefitting from the range of options that Parallels Automation gives us. Our customers and resellers will both benefit from our investment in this technology. This is a very important strategic move for the company," concluded Julian Dyer, CTO at Cobweb.

UK-based Cobweb Solutions is an IT services provider offering business of all sizes a range of hosted business tools. Over the last 13 years, Cobweb has grown to a position where it now delivers a range of products and services to over 10,000 customers.

Although it launched back in 1996 as an ISP, today Cobweb provides a broad range of products and services including email, SharePoint and broadband. This provides customers with a package of business applications that, because they are hosted, are geared towards taking the stress and unreliability out of IT management.

Cobweb sells directly to customers through its website and dedicated sales team, but sales through the channel play a very important role. Cobweb has built up a network of over 100 partners, from white-label resellers and ISPs to IT solutions providers, that resell products and services through the UK and abroad.

In order to maintain its position as a leading player in the industry, Cobweb is committed to infrastructure investment. The company has developed relationships with the worlds leading technology providers to support its service delivery including HP, EMC, MessageLabs and Nortel. In addition, Cobweb is a Microsoft Gold partner and a member of the Early Adopter and Technology Adoption Programmes.

1 The Problem – Satisfying Demand and Staying Ahead of the Game

Since it started offering Microsoft Hosted Exchange back in 1999, Hosted Exchange has become Cobweb's biggest selling and most popular product. As ever with Cobweb, customers are at the heart of every activity and the company knew Hosted Exchange customers would want the ability to make changes to their settings and permissions, as well as add and remove users.

To do this, Cobweb developed a control panel that would sit on top of the Hosted Exchange Platform and allow customers to easily log on and carry out these various tasks quickly and easily. The control panel became central to providing the levels of convenience to users that Cobweb was known for.

Over time, as new versions of Hosted Exchange were released, various tweaks and upgrades were made to the control panel to complement and support new features. This worked successfully for many years.



But recently, Cobweb has been keen to grow its range of offerings in addition to Hosted Exchange in order to meet growing customer demand. Cobweb wanted to be able to provide more products – for example, SharePoint - to its customers, but in a way that was easy to manage both for Cobweb and the user. But the existing platform and control panel was not able to manage additional products and services.

Cobweb knew that to make this possible and to maintain the high levels of ease-of-use and convenience, it would be necessary to develop a new platform that could hold a whole array of different products and of course have the user control panel that could manage them all in one place.

“In the last few years, technology has moved forward at a considerable pace, as has Cobweb,” explained Julian Dyer, CTO at Cobweb. “We need the flexibility to make additions and updates to our services without having to make wholesale changes to our platform, administration and the user control panel. Also, as our customer base expanded, the demands in terms of administration were growing.”

2 The Solution – Selecting Parallels

While it was possible to develop a new control panel and platform in-house, the time and resource this would require meant Cobweb was keen to explore other solutions that were available. Julian Dyer and his team assessed and trialed a range of different options, but one really stood out from the crowd and ticked all the boxes: Parallels Automation.

“Parallels offered us all the features we were looking for and more. Because our requirements were quite specific and our standards were high, we were almost resigned to creating a fully customised solution in house. So discovering Parallels Automation was a huge relief,” explained Julian Dyer.

There were a number of reasons why the Parallels solution was particularly appealing:

- Cross-vendor support – the solution wasn’t just tied to one software meaning that Cobweb could offer a range of different services quickly and easily
- Flexible billing and administration – the platform connected seamlessly into front and back-end systems, making e-commerce and billing effortless
- Reseller support and white-label functionality – with reseller support inbuilt, Cobweb had the potential to take its partner network to the next level

But it wasn’t all about features. After initial discussions, Julian Dyer felt that there was a real synergy between the two companies: “Parallels seemed to ‘fit’ with our future plans both in a technological sense but also with their company culture.

As this was a substantial infrastructure investment for us, it was comforting to know the product wouldn’t stand still, but that it would grow and develop with us moving forwards.”

3 Deploying Parallels Automation

It was very important that Parallels was deployed in a way that allowed for a seamless migration of existing users onto the new platform, whilst allowing new customers to still be processed. This meant integrating Parallels Automation with Cobweb’s existing control panel to preserve and uphold the user experience, allowing customers to retain their current user login details.

The deployment commenced in April 2008 and the platform was ready to take the first new customers in October – quite an achievement considering the technical intricacies involved in aligning the new platform with the old solution to ensure seamless migration for customers.

“The installation, despite the technical challenges, was relatively straightforward. We were very pleased with the levels of support we received from Parallels and the way it integrated with the current system. By linking the service with our existing platform, we could ensure the switch-over would be as pain-free as possible for our customers,” said Julian Dyer.

Within a few months of installation, over 100 new customers had successfully been installed on the new system.

“Getting the first few customers on was a fantastic culmination of six months hard work and we had no hesitation in opening it up to all our new prospects,” said Julian Dyer.

4 The Benefits

With the new platform in place, Julian Dyer and the Cobweb development team were able to try out the new features and begin to assess the key benefits, which include:

■ Offering New 'Connected' Services

Cobweb can now offer a wider range of service offerings to customers. The immediate priority was to integrate Hosted Exchange with the other Microsoft products Cobweb offered, including Hosted SharePoint 3 and Hosted CRM. The next stage will be to integrate the web hosting, managed server hosting and domain name services as well.

■ Streamlining Administration Procedures

Parallels Automation incorporates a back-end platform and front end user control panel, supported by a secure, but flexible billing system. This simplifies a number of processes across the business, from IT maintenance and updates to billing, customer service and account management. Having all this information in one place saves a significant amount of time for Cobweb staff, providing customers with a higher quality of service as they can manage the service through the easy-to-use control panel rather than having to speak to the support team.

5 Broadening Reseller Offering and Improving Quality of Service

Cobweb's reseller programme is fundamental to the success of the business. Parallels enables Cobweb to expand and improve the service its offers resellers, whilst making it easier to manage internally – a win-win situation for both Cobweb and its channel partners. Smaller ISPs, eager to offer their customers more services and increase their revenue per account can now do so. By investing in this cutting edge technology they don't have to, and with the range of white-labelling services and functions available, the relationship between resellers and their customers is preserved and improved like never before.

6 An Improved Customer Experience

One of Cobweb's key aims as an IT services provider is to take the hassle and inconvenience of managing IT away from businesses so they can get on with running their company. Parallels Automation allows the company to honour this by making everything available to customers through one easy-to-use control panel. Unified logins, easy account management and simple upgrades are all even easier to do with Parallels in place.

