IBM mainframe shops crave modern alternatives to the classic 'green screen' mainframe interface, suggests new poll

Over half say web and mobile access to more applications would help them maximize use of their mainframe systems

Crawley, UK, November 24, 2016 - 71% of IBM mainframe customers questioned in a new poll said the growing shortage of IT staff with mainframe experience makes it more important than ever to provide user-friendly alternatives to the platform's classic 'green screen' 3270 interface. 54% state that being able to deliver web and mobile access to more applications - something not possible through a standard 3270 interface - would help their businesses get the most out of the z/OS platform. However, costs and a lack of resources are an obstacle.

The survey, conducted by Macro 4, a division of UNICOM® Global, asked 48 attendees at this year's GSE UK Conference for IBM mainframe users about the way their organizations provide access to mainframe applications. Key findings are presented in an infographic: 'Macro 4 GSE survey results'.

"The 3270 interface has been an effective and enduring way of accessing mainframe applications for many years," said Keith Banham, Mainframe R&D Manager at Macro 4. "But one of its drawbacks is its reliance on text commands and function keys for navigating through applications - which can make it seem old-fashioned and cumbersome to modern users. The other major shortcoming is its lack of support for web and mobile, which is a real obstacle to wider access. Currently most people who rely on a 3270 interface are tied to a PC running a terminal emulator for accessing their mainframe applications. This is a huge turn-off given the mobile and home working revolution."

When asked about the disadvantages of the traditional 3270 interface, over half (51%) of the survey sample cited the inability of the traditional mainframe interface to support web or mobile access. 29% complained about it needing additional terminal emulation software installed on the user's device in order to provide access to applications. 60% noted that the classic 3270 interface looks less appealing than more modern interfaces and 44% pointed to it requiring more staff training.

"To make the z/OS platform more accessible, many companies have invested in developing their own customized web and mobile interfaces, but this can get expensive if they have to create a new interface from scratch for every application they have on the mainframe," explained Banham. "Half of those we polled said they had mainframe applications they'd like to web enable, but haven't done so because of the cost and resources it would involve."

One emerging solution to the accessibility issue is mainframe session management software that has been web enabled to provide a mobile-friendly browser interface to any application a user is authorized to access.

Most mainframe customers already provide their users with a session manager to improve user experience and increase productivity. Its main function has been to save users who work with multiple mainframe applications from having to log in to each one individually. After signing in to the session manager users can access all their applications securely from a single menu, switching from one to the other and even copying and pasting information between them.

"A web-enabled session manager such as Tubes from Macro 4 allows users to access their applications securely from any device with a browser – whether it's a laptop, tablet or smartphone," explained Banham. "This is a huge step forward because at a single stroke you can open up all your applications to web and mobile users, without costly web development or compromising on security."

This new generation of session manager pioneered by Macro 4 makes web access available as an optional feature alongside 3270 access for users who still want it, according to Banham: "3270 applications accessed through the Tubes session manager have the same 'look and feel' as before but they now work in a browser and respond to a touchscreen or mouse. Any function keys appear as buttons at the bottom of the screen, and are touchscreen enabled so the application can be used without a computer keyboard."

"If you want to go further, you also have an option to update the interface for individual applications, by adding graphics and dropdown menus, for example," added Banham.

72% of the companies surveyed agreed that using a web or mobile-enabled session manager was a fast and easy way of providing web access to mainframe applications.

"Most mainframe shops are implementing modernization strategies to help ensure that the mainframe stays relevant to today's IT and business users. Providing web and mobile access is critical and companies are finding new and innovative ways of tackling this challenge. Web-enabled session management is an important part of the picture," said Banham.

Macro 4 ran the survey of 48 IBM mainframe users in November 2016 at the GSE UK Conference held by Guide Share Europe (GSE), the premier IBM User Group in Europe. An infographic that highlights the main findings can be viewed here: http://macro4.com/files/2714/7997/8163/macro-4-gse-survey-results.jpg.

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About Macro 4 www.macro4.com

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