

Browsium IT Perspective

Who owns the browser in your enterprise? Probably no one, and that's a problem.

If your browser-based web applications stop working, who in your organization owns the issue? Every company has IT staff responsible for Windows, because that's where nearly all end user applications (like Word and the client side of client/server applications) used to run. But today, most business applications run in a browser. And, in most organizations, no one in IT is responsible for managing the browser. That's a problem.



As you've surely noticed, there has been a rapid application platform shift in the enterprise, away from native Windows applications and toward browser-based, web applications. In fact, it's not an exaggeration to say that your entire business is very likely reliant on browser-based applications. From an IT management standpoint, it's hard to imagine such a core piece of your IT infrastructure and business operations running without specific ownership armed with the appropriate set of management tools. However, that is exactly what's happening today in most modern enterprise browser environments.

While listening to our customers, some of the largest organizations in the world, we've noticed that very few stop to think about managing the enterprise browser until something is broken. This happens because IT staff members are busy taking care of their already-assigned responsibilities, and the shift to a predominantly browser-based application model has occurred sooner than they expected. Therefore, no one has been placed specifically in charge of the browser and web applications environment end-to-end. Inevitably, when a browser issue arises that directly impacts one or more areas of IT, company executives review the problem and decide what to do.

It's right around this time that the IT executives realize they don't have an internal browser expert and they're going to need one to find a solution to the problem. And so someone in IT, usually in desktop management, is tasked with becoming the browser expert. That person's first stop (hopefully) is Browsium.com where they can learn all about the importance of browser management and the tools they can use today to get ahead of these problems in the future.

So, you can wait until you have a crisis on your hands to begin to take control of the browsers in your enterprise. Or you can start today by making browser management a dedicated job function in your IT department. This Browsium IT Perspective will provide you with an overview of this browser ownership issue and ideas about what you can do in your organization to help determine who owns (or who should be owning) the browser.

How the browser became so complex

Part of the reason why browser ownership has not been a top priority is the inaccurate assumptions which have surrounded the browser from the beginning. Some time ago, it was common to hear that browsers would be interchangeable and thin client devices themselves would just be commodities. The client (and browser) was not going to matter. All the smarts and the horsepower was going to be in the datacenter ... and eventually the cloud.

But things didn't work out that way at all because the dominant vendor of PC operating systems had a vested interest in keeping the client relevant. So they did all they could to link the browser to the operating system, providing a powerful platform for enterprise applications. In making this strategic move, they ensured the all browsers were unique. Heck, even new versions of browsers from the same vendor were unique.

Thus the browser became a platform unto itself, creating a giant canvas for new business applications and a giant headache for IT managers responsible for keeping everything secure and operational.

Web applications are very different from native Windows applications

Web applications need to be managed very differently when compared with native Windows applications because these two types of applications have very different architectures. Native applications have mature, well defined operations methodologies. They are packaged, installed, have structured APIs, and are easily compartmentalized. On the other hand, web applications are open, versatile, and dynamic in architecture. They are compiled at runtime, have limitless APIs and scripting, and everything comes together in one process.

Due to the challenges brought on by the architecture of web applications, they must be managed differently from native applications. The browser now acts more like operating system that needs to be managed proactively, just like your desktops and network. To give you an example, running your business through an unmanaged browser is like buying a new car and putting a big sticker over the dash board to cover the indicators that light up when something minor is wrong with your car. You'll be able to drive the car for a long time, but at some point it will stop running due to a lack of maintenance, and by then everything under the hood may be completely ruined. Equipping yourself with indicators for minor issues that surface in your enterprise browser will save you a lot of time and money.

The state of browser ownership within enterprise

Rest assured, you are certainly not the only company lacking clearly defined browser ownership. This is common in most companies. Your IT department probably has network and desktop management teams where responsibilities are clearly defined. The business applications running in the browser have defined owners too. However, this is almost never the case for the browser itself. Since managing the browser spans 1) the browser application itself (e.g., iexplore.exe or chrome.exe), 2) the web applications and add-ons that run inside the browser, and 3) the security that surrounds the data transferred via the browser, it can be difficult to identify a default singular owner. You'll rarely find one person or group that has stepped up to own the browser from beginning to end.

There is often confusion around browser ownership. For example, we usually hear that since the browser is a part of the desktop OS, by default the desktop management team must own it. Or the security team will say, "Desktop management may own it, but we tell them what to do, so we have control over the browser settings." Furthermore, the browser has high-level visibility due to the amount of business productivity that flows through it on a daily basis, and therefore has the interest of business managers (or it should have). And since the browser is clearly part of the company's IT infrastructure, the CIO is ultimately responsible from an executive standpoint.

It is clear, enterprise browser responsibility touches several departments within the organization. However, if no one specifically owns responsibility for the browser itself, there are bound to be security blind spots and wasted resources. After all, when everyone owns it, no one is responsible.

Determining end-to-end browser environment ownership

Since Browsium runs into this situation so frequently, and has witnessed some excellent best practices, we have identified a brief plan of attack for those looking to take command of their enterprise browser. This is the process we've seen work to help enterprises start to proactively manage their browser.

Clarify the browser's importance

The first step is to make sure management understands the impact of the browser on the enterprise with regard to security and budget, along with the inherent risks if it is not managed. With heavy daily browser-based workloads from everyone in the company, the browser is one of the fundamental building blocks for your entire business. Illustrating just how critical the enterprise browser is to your modern enterprise is the first step.

Assess ownership of the browser

From there, start assessing which departments and employees are responsible for any element of browser management. For example, who conducts maintenance and updates, tracks software licensing and inventory, monitors add-on vulnerabilities, ensures application compatibility, evaluates new software needs, and plans security response for an exploit? After listing the different people that oversee some aspect of browser management, most IT executives start to realize they don't have any single department overseeing the browser in their enterprise. This can make it nearly impossible to properly manage your browser environment. During the browser ownership identification process, you should expect to start hearing more questions than answers about managing the browser.

Beginning the shift from reactive to proactive browser management

Typically, IT waits for something to break to seek assistance, partly because they have had no way to know or forecast the problem in advance. This process of addressing the problem gives you the opportunity to start an internal dialog about any looming issues that can be a ticking time bomb in your browser environment. These issues typically pertain to the entire browser environment. They are usually asked by one department charged with overseeing only part of the browser, but wondering what's going on in other segments of the browser environment that they have no visibility into. A good example is the desktop management team that would like to identify all versions of Java installed, but doesn't know who to ask to get this usage data. This information is needed to understand legacy Java versions used, the impact of removing them, and a plan to minimize security exposure if legacy versions are really required by critical end-user applications. Dialog between departments about this type of issue is an excellent opportunity to identify the need for ownership of the entire browser environment. From there this conversation can be driven up the management chain.

Based on the success stories we've uncovered, in most organizations ownership should be given to the desktop management team. This team is already responsible for all of the end-point computing that takes place in the enterprise, and this makes them the most prepared to adopt new ownership.

Taking the first step – educating management about the importance of the browser

Managing your dynamic browser environment strategically requires assigning ownership and empowering the team with appropriate tools. Our customers find by managing their browser they can achieve end-to-end control of this previously poorly controlled environment. This includes discovering granular insights about the environment, planning improvements, and acting to improve security, compatibility, productivity, and cost efficiency.

If the browser ownership situation we've described sounds familiar, you've ready to take the first step toward educating your management team about the importance of the browser in today's modern enterprise.

A key component of Browsium's mission is to further understanding about the importance of the browser in today's enterprise. More educational materials about browser management can be found at www.browsium.com or by contacting info@browsium.com.

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