

NETWORK tools

Support without having to talk to annoying users

There's nothing new about remote control applications that allow technical staff to take over PCs on their networks or over the Internet. Laplink and PCAnywhere are two applications dating back into the ancient history of IT that do exactly that. NetSupport Manager, however, produces remote control software that delivers more than one expects.



The old 'sneakerware' practice common in IT (where a technician has to physically visit each PC that has a problem) is a thing of the past – as long as it's a software problem. Using NetSupport Manager 8 (NSM), users can watch while IT staff log into their PCs and solve software or configuration problems, load or delete software from a remote location.

For starters, NSM delivers the basics of remote control. The company says it can even hook up to a DOS system, although we don't have an old DOS machine gathering dust to see if this is true, we are told there are still a few users that would appreciate this facility. NSM also supports almost any common network protocol.

NSM can also connect to and remote control a Linux or Mac system with a previously installed VNC (virtual network computing) client.

But sitting at a remote console, viewing another PC's screen and installing, uninstalling, configuring, deleting, etc. is nothing to get excited about. There are plenty of products that can do that. It's the added functionality NSM brings to the party that makes it a worthwhile buy.

Additional features of the product include file transfer, chat and remote deployment facilities, as well as hardware and software inventory. Version 8 also provides for fast file synchronisation using delta file transfer – which only transfers parts of files that have been changed since the last operation.

Once installed, the IT staff use the control interface as a dashboard to managing other PCs, which need to have an NSM client utility loaded. Profiles can be set up to determine who connects to what and what rights the IT staff have. For example, some may have administration privileges and are able to do anything on the client PC, while others may only have limited rights associated with repairing the system or loading new software.

The security is a benefit many IT managers will appreciate as they can limit what can be done to their users, PCs rather than try to resolve the emergencies that may happen in exceptional cases.

Virtual voyeurism

The control panel provides an easy-to-use menu that takes the user into each function. All clients on the network can be viewed or one can search for a specific system, or group them according to certain user or location characteristics. Double-click on a system in the main display to remotely connect – as simple as that.

IT staff do not have to take over the client immediately, but can passively view the user's actions (for purely educational purposes,

you understand). These days it may be wise to warn users of this feature before using it. From there it's simple to start a chat session or file transfer to assist users to use their systems and applications better. The client can even be rebooted or switched off if required.

It should be noted that the voyeuristic and communications features are useful for training users in a new application, or for identifying users' weaknesses and then providing one-on-one training without having the trainers or the users leave their desks.

Control your inventory

This version of NSM also delivers a new Internet gateway for secure connectivity and an inventory module.

The Internet Gateway facilitates remote control between PCs that may both be located behind different firewalls. It delivers a secure method for locating and handshaking via HTTP without the need for modifications to existing firewall configurations. Something IT admin may want to take note of.

To ensure access to sensitive machines – such as the PC the MD surfs 'educational' sites from – is secure, communications can be encrypted and entry controlled and logged.

In the inventory module, system information is collected about the hardware of the client PC, providing information needed to assist in problem resolution. It also reports on applications installed via NetSupport's advanced scanning technology.

Broad application

NSM seems to fit well into small or mid-sized IT environments, but Tito Pereira, MD of *Blue Label Technology*, local distributor, says the product is designed to function well in an environment consisting of two PCs, all the way up to enterprises. NSM is sold on a per-seat basis, with the controller available at no charge. In a 500-seat environment, for example, costs would be in the region of R302 excl. VAT per seat.

While the idea behind NSM is not unique, the product will find a home in most organisations without expensive management suites. It provides necessary software support functionality as well as a bunch of extra features that, if used appropriately, make the cost well worth the buy.

Recently appointed NSM partners include Integr8 IT, Paracon, JMR Software and Blue Point.

For more information contact Tito Pereira, Blue Label Technology, 011 234 3399.