

Remote Control Software: A Primer

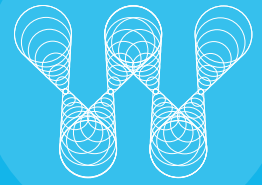


Remote control software enables you to work on a remote computer in real time as if you were using its own keyboard and mouse. The other computer can be physically located across the hall or around the world. Remote control software has been around for over twenty years and was originally used over telephone lines via modems. Today these powerful software programs are most often run over high speed local area networks, over private wide area networks, or over the Internet.

Remote control software consists of two separate computer programs, a "client version" that is installed on the computer to be controlled, and a "control version" that is installed on the controlling computer. Sometimes the host version is called a "slave" and the client is called a "master." In corporate settings, IT administrators can maintain critical servers and bring IT expertise to distant users' desktops. The power of remote control software completely negates the old saying that "You can't be in two places at the same time."

For those organizations that have not yet implemented a remote control solution for their users, the technical support choices that they are faced with are not appealing. If they are in the same building or in a nearby office, 'sneakernet' is the logical choice. The support person simply walks over to the user's desk and offers assistance. Of course, longer distance offices would require a time consuming commute, or reliance on a co-worker that may or may not be qualified to assist. Telephone-only support is a low cost option, but tends to be frustrating and time consuming for both the employee and help desk technician. As branch locations add staff, they may require much more expensive technical support options: 1) hire a dedicated IT person for that office, or 2) establish a contract with an outsourced vendor with technicians close to that office.

After reviewing the unattractive options above, most people will conclude that an investment in a remote control package will be well worth the cost. However, not all programs are created equally and there are many considerations that potential buyers must consider.



First and foremost, companies must look for applications that are easy to install and use. Whether they are a small firm or a Fortune 500 company, enterprise-class deployment and manageability are absolutely essential. Here are some features to look for:

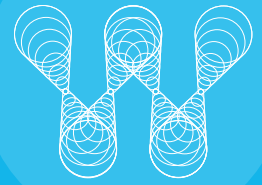
- Ability to remotely install multiple workstations simultaneously
- Ability to remotely uninstall multiple workstations simultaneously
- Ability to remotely update licensing on multiple workstations simultaneously
- Ability to create and install specific client configurations to multiple workstations

Speed is also an important criterion, especially for organizations using slow wide area network links. Well written programs will minimize delays even over limited bandwidth. Some applications also provide administrators with a “client scanning” feature to quickly scroll through multiple desktops in a single window.

Traditional remote control software includes file transfer functions along with remote control capabilities. Some capabilities to look for would be the:

- Ability to distribute files to all connected clients
- Ability to distribute files to selected clients
- Ability to distribute files to a pre-defined group of clients

Whether it is remote control or file transfer, one of the top issues today with any application is security. That is why any package under consideration should include encryption and strong security features. Top candidates should provide options for encrypting authentication schemes and data streams, preferably by using 256-bit DES (Digital Encryption Standard) and AES (Advanced Encryption Standard) encryption schemes. Common security features, such as lockout, connection restrictions and file-access permissions, should be standard features. Financial institutions looking to control their ATM fleets will greatly appreciate these security features.



There are many other features to consider when choosing a remote control package:

- Automated scripting
- Windows Vista and other OS support
- Messaging/Help requests
- Vendor's experience
- Vendor's installed base
- Affordability
- Free trial offer

IT administrators will find that a powerful Scripting Language and Scheduler will allow them to automate the tasks that they would normally perform repetitively - this offers huge potential time savings. Businesses that use UNIX, Linux or Solaris servers or Apple Macintosh desktops will naturally want to make sure that these Operating Systems are supported, while Windows-only shops should ensure that the remote control software that they are considering supports Windows Vista and 64Bit systems should they ever upgrade to them in the future.

It can be very convenient for the IT Department to be able to easily send a text message to one or more chosen PCs, or even broadcast to all PCs on the network. This can be used for alerting employees of an impending server shutdown, or used by senior managers to send important messages to various departments or every employee. Going in the opposite direction, some remote control applications include an option that permits users to send help requests directly to a corporate helpdesk when they need assistance. The help request can either be sent to all available operators, or directed to specific operators based on user defined accounts.

Nothing guarantees a stable platform more than vendor experience and a substantial installed base. In addition to providing more robust software, larger software developers will often have the resources to provide more technical support and customer service options as well. Don't forget to look at documentation as well – a major vendor will include a top notch technical manual. Of course, every company needs to keep an eye on their IT budgets, and closely monitor their software spending.



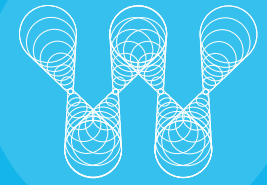
That is where a free trial offer can really help – no need to waste money on a program that does not meet the company’s specifications and budget.

Above and beyond controlling servers and workstations, some high-end remote control packages offer other practical uses:

- Hardware inventory
- Software inventory
- Training

Network administrators are able to obtain a real-time view of the hardware and software installed on target workstations at the click of a button. A hardware report is an excellent planning tool when it comes to determining if particular machines are able to run updated operating systems and applications, while a software report is invaluable in tracking software licenses. If an organization has over-purchased licenses, they can drop some support and renewal contracts. If they have under-purchased, they can purchase additional licenses and obtain peace of mind that they are safe from any type of software audit and accompanying possible legal actions. While a software inventory feature from a remote control software vendor is a certainly nice feature, it should be pointed out that it can not act as a replacement for a full blown Asset Management package.

Remote control solutions that include whiteboard features should make any organization’s short list. Some remote control software vendors include this functionality as part of their chat / multi-chat session. Trainers are able to utilize a range of screen highlighting tools to visually support their text chat with users and emphasize important points. A “show” feature even permits the facilitator to let multiple desktops simultaneously view their master screen.



Without a doubt, the vast majority of IT workers would gladly welcome a feature-rich and easy to use remote control solution, but their Accounting Department or CFO may have reservations. According to independent research from Gartner, the estimated cost to manually support 2,500 desktops over a three-year period at best would be greater than \$650,000, at worst \$5.5 million. This is based on the number, complexity and types of calls and the time needed to address each call. It does not include costs of dispatching technicians, user downtime, and the salaries of support personnel. Judging from these numbers alone, it should be obvious that there is a significant ROI in deploying remote control software that plays a key role in ensuring that an organization's critical IT infrastructure has high availability and granular manageability.

The bottom line is that remote control software can:

- Dramatically reduce the cost of supporting client desktops
- Significantly cut the cost of server administration
- Appreciably deliver productivity gains to information workers by providing them with more reliable systems and faster technical support
- Make telecommuters and remote support staff more productive
- Improve IT staff morale

Fortunately, organizations do not need to have thousands of endpoints to support in order to justify installing a comprehensive and capable remote management solution. Even very small firms can justify the expense. They will just want to make sure that they chose a package that delivers powerful remote control with advanced desktop management functionality that is completely integrated into a single, intuitive interface.

About NetSupport

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