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NetSupport DNA version 2

This well-implemented network monitoring package gets a significant update.

We first [looked at DNA](#) - NetSupport's Dynamic Network Administration - just over a year ago. Now the company has brought out version 2, with a raft of updates and new features.

As before the package comprises a central database (which uses MSDE to drive its data repository), a management package (the application the system manager uses to manipulate the systems) and the client agent (which sits on each workstation or server and services the central server's requests). Although MSDE can be a pain to install by hand, this isn't a worry with DNA2 because the installer does everything automatically for you. Because it uses the MSDE database engine, it'll be no surprise that the server component runs only on Windows NT/2000/XP or WS2003; the console has similar platform support, though the client extension is happy on anything from Windows 98 onwards. Incidentally, if you already have an MDSE, SQL Server 7 or SQL Server 2000 database to hand, DNA2 will happily use that instead of creating its own MSDE world.

DNA2 incorporates a number of components that can be purchased separately (but see our buying advice). You get hardware and software inventory tools, Internet usage monitoring and restriction (as well as being an interrogation client, the DNA2 client package can enforce browsing policies as per the server's instructions), software package distribution, application usage metering, remote desktop control, and an integrated helpdesk tool.

The user interface will be perfectly familiar to anyone who's used the old version, as the structure is pretty much the same. The console has an Explorer-like window, with an overview of items on the left and the detail of whatever item's selected in the main, right-hand pane. The GUI is rather more colourful and playboxy than your average blue-and-grey Windows application, but this isn't necessarily a bad thing - at least it's usable and clear.

Evolution, not revolution

It's really the behind-the-scenes stuff that's evolved since version 1. Although the package will discover the devices on its local network, NetSupport has realised that you may wish to deal with more than an auto-discovery system can tell you - remote computers, for example, or historical information about hardware and software that used to be installed on your various machines (useful if, for instance, your software portfolio includes both full versions and upgrades). To supplement the automated system, then, you now get the ability to define workstations by hand, or to add hand-crafted stuff to your machines that isn't detected automatically, such as PDAs or USB flash drives that aren't often connected. There is even a stand-alone hardware inventory tool that laptop users can run by hand on their own machine before sending the results in to the main office.

The application licence metering facility is very much as we remember it from version one, with the exception that you can now group applications together. Similarly, the software distribution works largely as it used to, but with some neat trickery aimed (again!) at multi-side installations that don't want to be pushing installer archives over the same WAN link ten times when installing to ten machines. You can now nominate a remote client as a kind of proxy installer agent, ship the installer package to that client, and have all the other machines that are local to that client download the files over their LAN.

Any downsides to DNA2? Just the package builder tool, really. It's still a tad pedestrian, because it adds files to packages when you select them, instead of when you've finished clicking - which means you have to stop and wait if you've selected something huge. If this is all we can find that's wrong, we're not going to moan all that much. A price tag that drops below £40 per seat for a decent-sized installation reinforces this decision not to gripe excessively.

NetSupport DNA2 is an excellent system management tool whose manufacturers are clearly listening to their users, since the new additions in version 2 all strike us as the typical kind of feedback you get from real world users. It's simple to use, the client agent doesn't seem to unduly hammer the host PC, and for a multi-faceted package the price tag is attractive too.