Remote access software

Dave Mitchell rounds up 12 of the best utilities for managing your PCs over a network or the Internet

I n a perfect world, all your data would be accessible whatever your physical location. Although by no means a reality, we're getting closer to this ideal, and remote access software is providing the tools to achieve it.

In its most basic form, it allows you to access your home or work PC from a remote location using a variety of communications methods, as well as control it, run its applications and transfer files between the two systems. Obviously, this is a useful tool for mobile workers, as it allows them to access the corporate network and associated applications while on the road. However, these abilities are also proving to be extremely valuable for support staff.

It's common knowledge that many companies have overworked and understaffed support departments struggling to cope with users' demands, so tools that allow them to access a workstation and troubleshoot it without having to be physically present will have a major impact on efficiency. Either way, it's clear that companies and individuals can benefit tremendously from remote access software, and in this month's group test we bring together 12 of the top products in this market.

The two most common connection methods these days are via a network or the Internet, with all products supporting links over TCP/IP. Some products such as LapLink and pcAnywhere support connections over serial, parallel and USB ports, but these aren't so popular now that basic Ethernet networks cost so little to install and broadband Internet is becoming more prevalent.

The most common implementation of remote access software is where the system to be controlled – the host – has an agent installed locally, while the system that will access it – the master or guest – carries the main administration interface. However, even these requirements have been slimmed down in some cases. Expertcity's GoToMyPC only downloads a viewer to the guest during a connection and removes it afterwards, making it useful where users need to reach remote systems from public Internet access points. LANDesk's Instant Support Suite goes in the opposite direction, as the host only receives an agent for the duration of the control session.

Along with remote control, there's a wide range of other features from which to choose. File-transfer tools come as standard and allow you to view local and remote hard disks from the same interface as well as copy, move and delete files across the two systems. A few also offer synchronisation, where folders on the guest and host can both be kept up to date. Basic chat facilities let you hold a text-based conversation with a remote user, and some of the more sophisticated products support audio communications.

Personal use may have driven the remote access market for many years, but the opportunities for delivering timely support and help desk facilities can't be ignored. Whereas some of the products on review are clearly suited to assisting support departments managing a large user base, others such as LapLink Everywhere and Symantec's pcAnywhere are increasingly being used by smaller businesses that need to provide customer support but simply don't have the manpower or the resources to always be on-site.

Companies providing bespoke software applications or services, for example, often insist on remote-control software being supplied as part of their package. This allows them to easily monitor a customer installation from their own offices and provide an immediate response to configuration and troubleshooting issues. Even simple housekeeping tasks such as disk defragmentation can be carried out easily outside normal hours by support staff.

Training tools are also evident in some products – most notably NetSupport Manager and PC-Duo Remote Control, as these allow a guest system to broadcast its screen and all activity that occurs within to any number of hosts, making it useful as a classroom tool.

However, before you reach for the chequebook, consider what you want from your remote access solution, as there are also a number of free alternatives that can provide basic remote-control facilities. Windows XP Professional and the soon-to-be-released Windows Server 2003 provide Remote Desktop and Remote Assistance tools. The former allows you to take over these systems from a PC using any version of Windows running the Terminal Server Client (**www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/pro/downloads/rdclientdl.asp**), while the latter lets you invite other users such as help desk or support staff to view or take over your system to assist with troubleshooting.

Another alternative is one of the many freely available VNC (virtual network computing) utilities. We tried out the version from AT&T Labs (**www.uk.research.att.com/vnc**), which provides basic, easy-to-use remote-control tools and supports password-protected socket links. On connection, it can also blank the host's screen and lock out the keyboard and mouse. Another VNC client worth checking is that supplied by TridiaVNC, which offers a few minor enhancements (**www.tridiavnc.com**).

Whether you're a single user or a support department, it's clear remote access software has something for everyone. Are your support personnel looking in need of a break from the daily drudgery of help-desk duties? Do your staff need to stay in touch with head office while out on the road? Or do you just need to keep working while you're away on holiday? Either way, turn the page and you'll find there's plenty of remote access and support choices with the features to suit a wide range of remote possibilities.

> Whether you're a single user or a support department, it's clear remote access software has something for everyone

ENTERPRISE
Remote access software

● FEATURE TABLE

	3am Labs Remotely Anywhere 4.7	Altiris Carbon Copy Solution 5.7	Danware NetOp Remote Control 7.5	Expertcity GoToMyPC Corporate 3	Funk Software Proxy 4	LANDesk Instant Support Suite 2	LapLink Everywhere Deluxe	Netopia Timbuktu Pro 5.1
Overall rating	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Price per user (10 users, exc VAT)	£29	£35	£60	£17	£26	1-5 consoles, £1,330 each	£110	£47
Price per user (100 users, exc VAT)	£17	£30	£30	£13	£15	N/A	£82	£26
Supplier	Ingram Micro Services 020 8905 6969	Altiris 0870 763 6000	Richmond Systems 01428 641616	E-olé Holdings 0870 345 1096	Network Utilities 020 8390 9911	LANDesk Software Europe 0118 902 6565	LapLink 0870 241 0983	Computers Unlimited 020 8200 8282
Manufacturer's website	www.remotely anywhere.com	www.altiris.co.uk	www.netopuk.com	www.expertcity.com	www.funk.com	www.landesksoftware.co.uk	www.laplink.com	www.netopia.com
OPERATING SYSTEM SUPPORT								
Windows 95, 98, ME	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Windows NT 4	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Windows 2000	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Windows XP	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Novell NetWare	✗	✗	✔	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Linux	✗	✗	✔	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Macintosh	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✔
Others	✗	✗	Windows CE, Solaris, Symbian OS	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
NETWORK TRANSPORT SUPPORT								
NetBEUI	✗	✗	✔	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
IPX/SPX	✗	✗	✔	✗	✔	✗	✔	✗
TCP/IP	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
CONNECTION METHODS								
Network	✔	✔	✔	✗	✔	✔	✔	✔
Internet	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Modem	✗	✔	✔	✗	✗	✗	✔	✔
Parallel port	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Serial port	✗	✗	✔	✗	✗	✗	✔	✗
USB port	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✔	✗
Other	✗	✗	ISDN CAPI 2	✗	✗	✗	ISDN CAPI 2	✗
FEATURES								
Remote control	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Browser remote control	✔	✔	✔	✔	✗	✔	✗	✗
Remote view	✗	✗	✗	✔	✔	✔	✗	✔
Broadcast show	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
File transfer	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Folder synchronisation	✗	✔	✔	✗	✗	✗	✔	✗
Text chat	✔	✔	✔	✗	✔	✔	✔	✔
Voice chat	✗	✔	✔	✗	✗	✗	✔	✔
Client scanning	✗	✗	✗	✗	✔	✗	✗	✗
Hardware inventory	✗	✗	✔	✗	✗	✔	✗	✗
Software inventory	✗	✗	✔	✗	✗	✔	✗	✗
Software deployment	✗	✔	✔	✔	Command line only	Web server	Serial link only	✗
HELP DESK TOOLS								
Run client at Windows startup	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✗	✗	✔
Remote reboot	✔	✔	✔	✗	✗	✔	✗	✗
Send Ctrl-Alt-Del	✗	✔	✔	✔	✔	✗	✗	✗
Wake-on-LAN support	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Remote power-down	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Job scheduler	✗	✔	✗	✗	✗	✗	✔	✗
Screen record/playback	✗	✗	✔	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Connect to multiple clients	✔	✗	✗	✔	✔	✗	✗	✔
Lock host keyboard/mouse	✗	✗	✔	✔	✔	✗	✔	✗
Blank host screen	✗	✗	✔	✔	✔	✗	✔	✔
SECURITY								
NT domain authentication	✔	✔	Security Server	✗	✔	✔	✗	✔
Active Directory Services	✗	✔	Security Server	✗	✔	✔	✗	✔
Novell Directory Services	✔	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
LDAP support	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✔
Host username/password	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✗	✔	✔
Call back on modem link	✗	✔	✔	✗	✗	✗	✔	✗
Protect local configuration	✗	✔	✗	✔	✔	✗	✔	✔
Encryption	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✗	✔	✗

How we test

The overall speed of remote access is difficult to judge due to the myriad of connections possible and their supported transfer rates. For example, remotely controlling a PC over a standard Ethernet network is going to be quicker than running the session over a 56K modem Internet link. The one task that's likely to take the longest and have the biggest impact on your patience is file transfer, so we opted to test this feature on each review product.

To achieve a best-case scenario, we limit the test to a connection between two systems on a dedicated LAN. For the guest system, we use a 1.13GHz Pentium III server equipped with 512MB of RAM and running Windows 2000 Server SP 3 with Internet Explorer 6 SP 1 installed. At the centre of the network is an Allied Telesyn AT-9410GB Gigabit Ethernet switch and the server is connected via a 1000BaseT network adaptor. The host system is a Pentium III/866 server with 768MB of RAM – also with Windows 2000 Server SP 3 installed – while the network connection is through a 10/100BaseTX network adaptor. Prior to each test, both servers are refreshed with a disk image of a clean OS installation. Although initial tests indicated there was little to be gained in terms of performance, we also switched off any encryption on each product.

The first test is a simple copy of a 571MB VideoCD format file from the guest to the host using each product's file-transfer tools. As the file is already compressed, any other techniques offered by each product will have no effect on performance. The second test involves copying a folder to the host containing a 602MB mixture of bitmaps, documents, spreadsheets, databases and PowerPoint presentations.

You'd think each remote access product would be able to copy a file from one PC to another in roughly the same amount
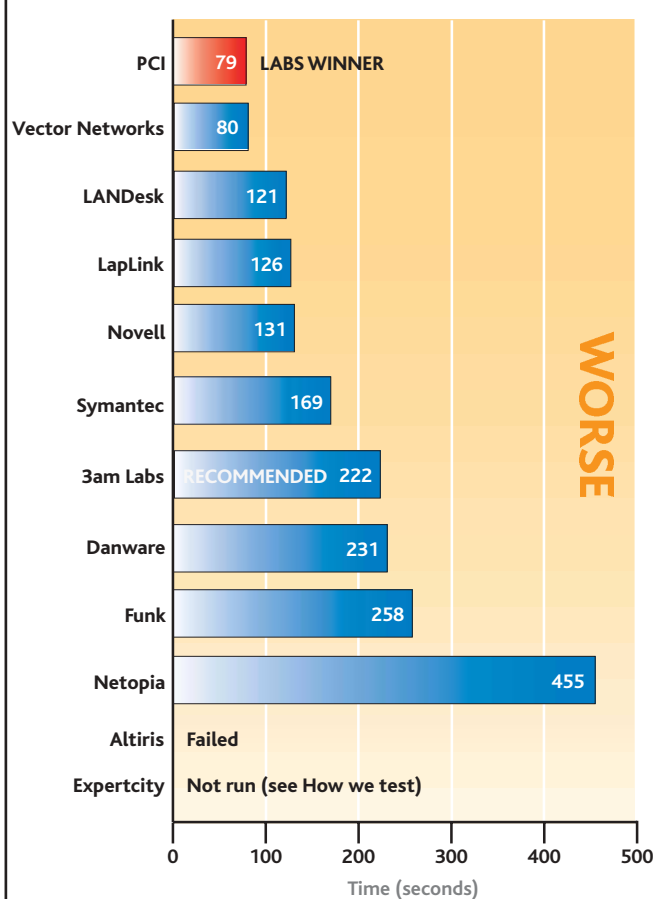
Product comparison

	Novell ZENworks for Desktops 4	PCI NetSupport Manager 8	Symantec pcAnywhere 10.5	Vector Networks PC-Duo Enterprise Remote Control 7.1
Rating	★★★☆☆☆	★★★★★☆	★★★★☆☆	★★★★★☆
Price	£50	£48	£115	£56
	£50	£34	£98	£37
Supplier	Novell	Productive Computer Insight	Symantec	Vector Networks
Telephone	01344 724000	01733 322505	020 7616 5600	01827 67333
Web	www.novell.com	www.pci.co.uk	www.symantec.com	www.vector-networks.com

(Feature comparison — checkmarks/notes by product)

Novell ZENworks	PCI NetSupport	Symantec pcAnywhere	Vector Networks PC-Duo
98 only	✔	✔	✔
✔	✔	✔	✔
✔	✔	✔	✔
✔	✔	✔	✔
✔	✗	✗	✗
✗	Virtual Network Client	✗	✗
✗	Virtual Network Client	✗	✗
✗	✗	✗	✗
✗	✔	✗	✔
✔	✔	✗	✔
✔	✔	✔	✔
✔	✔	✔	✔
✔	✔	✔	✔
✗	Gateway only	✔	Gateway only
✗	✗	✔	✗
✗	✗	✔	✗
✗	✗	✗	✗
✗	✗	ISDN CAPI 2	✗
✔	✔	✔	✔
✔	✔	✗	✔
✔	✔	✗	✔
✗	✔	✗	✔
✔	✔	✔	✔
✗	✔	✔	✔
✔	✔	✔	✔
✗	✔	✔	✔
✗	✔	✗	✔
✔	✔	✗	✔
✔	NT/2000/XP	✔	✔
✔	✔	✔	✔
✔	✔	✔	✔
✔	✔	✔	✔
✔	✔	✗	✔
✗	✔	✗	✔
✔	✔	✔	✔
✗	✔	✔	✔
✗	✔	✔	✔
✔	✔	✔	✔
✔	✔	✔	✔
✔	✗	✔	✗
NDS/eDirectory	✗	✔	✗
✔	✗	✔	✗
✗	✔	✔	✔
✗	✗	✔	✗
✗	✔	✔	✔
✔	✔	✔	✔

● SINGLE FILE WRITE TO ONE CLIENT

	Time (seconds)	
PCI	79	LABS WINNER
Vector Networks	80	
LANDesk	121	
LapLink	126	
Novell	131	
Symantec	169	
3am Labs	222	RECOMMENDED
Danware	231	
Funk	258	
Netopia	455	
Altiris	Failed	
Expertcity	Not run (see How we test)	

WORSE →

● MULTIPLE FILES WRITE TO ONE CLIENT

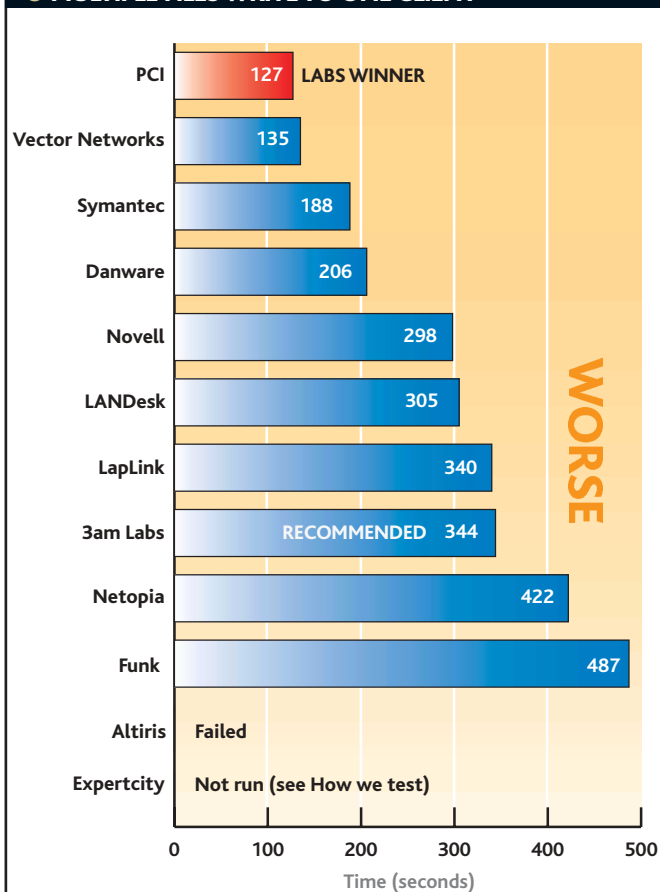|	Time (seconds)	
PCI	127	LABS WINNER
Vector Networks	135	
Symantec	188	
Danware	206	
Novell	298	
LANDesk	305	
LapLink	340	
3am Labs	344	RECOMMENDED
Netopia	422	
Funk	487	
Altiris	Failed	
Expertcity	Not run (see How we test)	

WORSE →

of time, and it came as a surprise to see how much variation there was. Altiris' Carbon Copy Solution is marked as having failed the tests, as it took 50 minutes to copy the video file and 37 minutes to copy the mixture. As Expertcity's GoToMyPC only operates over the Internet through the company's website, we chose not to include any comparative test results as it would be unfair. However, out of curiosity we did try copying the video file and estimate that it would have taken about eight hours to transfer.

Performance is only one area we consider when choosing the best product. The ease with which the software can be deployed and used will be important, as it should be designed to help and not hinder support staff. The number of features also comes into the equation, as we find this varies considerably, particularly with remote-control tools, where some products merely offer a window to the host system and no options for drawing tools, sending keystrokes or rebooting.

3am Labs RemotelyAnywhere 4.7

PRICE 10 users, £29 per user; 100 users, £17 per user (all exc VAT)
SUPPLIER Ingram Micro Services 020 8905 6969   **INTERNET** www.remotelyanywhere.com
VERDICT The host with the most – it's simple to install and use and offers an impressive selection of valuable remote-support tools.

RemotelyAnywhere stands out from the crowd because it complements remote control and file transfer with a host of tools aimed squarely at support staff. It's a cinch to use as well – you only need to install it on the systems you want to control. It loads a Java-based application that allows them to be accessed by a compliant browser from anywhere over the Internet – so you aren't limited to a PC, you can use other devices such as WAP-enabled PDAs too.

Security is tight, as RemotelyAnywhere supports NT domain authentication, SSH and SSL, offers 128-bit encryption and also provides IP filtering and IP address blocking. Even NDS (Novell Directory Services) is on the menu, although you can only assign permissions to eDirectory groups.

The browser interface won't win any beauty prizes, but it does provide easy access to the wealth of tools. On connection to a host, you get an overview of the system with details such as the BIOS, installed OS, authentication method and a brief connection history. It also automatically checks for any program updates on the 3am Labs website.

You can swiftly fire up remote control, file transfer and text-based chat sessions, but it's also possible to Telnet to the host and open a Command Prompt. The file-transfer window is basic, as it doesn't support drag-and-drop, so copy, delete and renaming operations are run using the function keys. You can always use the bundled FTP server instead, though.

RemotelyAnywhere scores highest with its administration tools. You can use features such as remotely viewing running processes, starting and stopping services and drivers, editing and compacting the Registry, and configuring the task scheduler – all without using a remote-control session. From the Performance option, you're able to view processor and memory usage, check on network performance and keep an eye on space usage on all hard disks.

There's much more, as RemotelyAnywhere delves deeper into the host system to tell you about running processes, Registry keys in use and installed PCI devices. The only drawback is the average performance in the file-transfer tests, but considering the amount of remote-support tools at your fingertips this is a small price to pay.

PRO RATINGS	
EASE OF USE	★★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★★

Altiris Carbon Copy Solution 5.7

PRICE 10 users, £35 per user; 100 users, £30 per user (all exc VAT)
SUPPLIER Altiris 0870 763 6000   **INTERNET** www.altiris.co.uk
VERDICT A smart browser-based solution that includes good management and deployment tools, but remote-control options are minimal and file-transfer performance is fatally slow.

Along with its basic Carbon Copy remote-control software for single users, Altiris offers a web-based version for the larger business. Carbon Copy Solution is one of a range of products aimed at desktop management, software deployment and support and is designed to make remote-control and file-transfer tools directly accessible from a browser.

The product range is built around the Altiris eXpress Notification Server (NS), which looks after each installed Solution and manages software distribution to each client. This requires an SQL database to store client details, and smaller sites can use the bundled copy of MSDE (Microsoft Data Engine).

Installation of the NS is nicely streamlined, as all required components are automatically installed if not already present. The next task is to deploy the NS client to each workstation. You can use the NS administration console to push the software out to selected systems or allow them to pull it in from a pre-prepared web page.

With this installed, each client can now access the NS and receive downloads of new applications or configuration changes. The Carbon Copy Solution component is then loaded into the NS console and a package is created to install an agent to systems selected from the console discovery routine. A useful feature of the NC client is it allows you to make changes to Carbon Copy configurations and push them to all workstations.

Collections are used to keep workstations in manageable groups and you can view a list of those running the Carbon Copy agent. On selecting one, you'll find the support tools provided are basic. A remote-control session allows you to take over a client, send keystrokes and have a voice or text chat. The system can also be remotely rebooted, but you don't get any drawing tools and you can't blank their screen or lock the keyboard and mouse.

During testing, Carbon Copy was unable to complete either file copy test in less than 40 minutes. We advised Altiris' support team, who agreed that we'd uncovered a flaw in the software and suggested using the standalone version instead, but we declined this offer. To make matters worse, Altiris suggested downloading a utility from its support site, which we found was infected with a Trojan Horse virus.

PRO RATINGS	
EASE OF USE	★★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★★

Danware NetOp Remote Control 7.5

PRICE 1 guest, £95; 10 hosts, £60 per user; 100 hosts, £30 per user (all exc VAT)

SUPPLIER Richmond Systems 01428 641616   **INTERNET** www.netopuk.com

VERDICT Excellent client deployment tools and tough security options, but it comes a close second to NetSupport Manager for features.

N etOp Remote Control's impressive range of support features makes up for its average performance in the file-transfer tests. It comprises two components: a Guest and a Host. The latter is easily installed on multiple systems using NetOp's deployment utility, which – unlike NetSupport Manager – supports all Windows systems. Platform support is superb, as NetOp includes hosts for Linux and Windows CE along with an ActiveX control for browser-based remote control.

Security options are extensive too. Guests won't allow unprotected access and insist on a password, although you can set a global password at the guest to avoid having to enter it for each connection. If you want to beef this up, the optional Security Server offers support for NT domain authentication and Active Directory, but adds £840 to the asking price.

The main guest interface keeps everything neat and tidy under a row of tabbed folders. Hosts are selected by browsing the network, picking one from the display of discovered systems and starting a remote-control or file-transfer session. Sessions can be automatically recorded and saved for later viewing, but – unlike NetSupport Manager – you can't broadcast these to host systems for training purposes. However, host inventory was as good and we were particularly impressed with the levels of information about applications that NetOp gathered from our test systems.

A scripting tool is provided for automating various tasks, but don't expect any enlightenment from the tedious documentation, as it doesn't provide guidance on performing different tasks and merely lists each NetOp menu option. Although focusing primarily on networks, NetOp supports a wide range of alternative connection methods including modems, ISDN adaptors or a simple local connection via a null-modem cable. You can create different connection profiles and NetOp maintains an extensive phonebook for managing all your hosts for easy selection.

Any system running the host software can be accessed by a browser. A guest just runs the bundled ActiveX control, enters the IP address of the host and remotely controls it from the browser window. Security is good, as even here you need to provide a valid password before the host will accept the connection request.

PC PRO RATINGS

EASE OF USE	★★★★☆☆
FEATURES	★★★★☆☆
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★☆☆☆
OVERALL	★★★★☆☆

Expertcity GoToMyPC Corporate 3

PRICE 10 users, £17 per user; 100 users, £13 per user (all exc VAT)

SUPPLIER E-olé Holdings 0870 345 1096   **INTERNET** www.expertcity.com

VERDICT A remarkably simple web-hosted solution ideally suited to businesses that need to deploy remote access to a large user base and don't want to muck around with IP addresses.
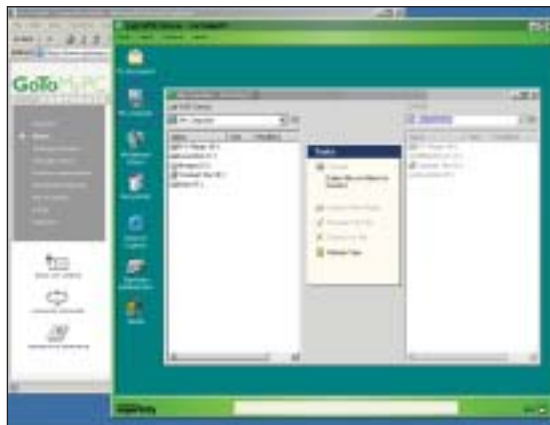
G oToMyPC takes a different approach to remote access, as it's a hosted web service provided by Expertcity. It's remarkably simple to use. First, you register an account at the company's website and enter the email addresses of those users whose systems you wish to control. They receive a message inviting them to log on to the Expertcity website and download a small utility that allows their system to be remotely accessed over the Internet.

The host utility can be loaded manually or run as a service making the system available at all times. When first loaded, you need to provide a suitable alias for the system and enter a password that's only stored locally. As luck would have it, when we registered our test account an attack on the Expertcity mail server was in progress, resulting in activation emails arriving some six hours late. However, once the message arrived, the installation process was commendably swift.

All communications go through the Expertcity website, even if you're controlling a workstation on the same LAN. The guest system logs on to the website, where it can view and select available hosts. A small viewer utility is installed and, once the connection is terminated, it's removed, leaving no trace. The remote-control window is a simple affair with options for file transfer, sending keystrokes, chatting and a basic drawing tool. Understandably, performance is dependent on the type of Internet connection and, although we were using a 2Mb pipeline, we didn't feel it was fair to run the file copy tests. However, we did find remote-control response was reasonable, if a little slow at times.

GoToMyPC provides plenty of security measures, as the website uses SSL and 128-bit AES encryption. Host passwords will only be accepted if they contain at least eight alphanumeric characters, and a counter can be set to disconnect the session after a specific period of inactivity. The Corporate version – as opposed to the personal version, aimed at SMEs with 1-20 users – provides an administration site, which is set up on the Expertcity website. This allows you to create multiple users, manage and monitor connections and produce detailed reports on service usage.

PC PRO RATINGS

EASE OF USE	★★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★☆☆☆
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★☆☆
OVERALL	★★★★☆☆

Funk Software Proxy 4

PRICE 1 master, £63; 10 hosts, £26 per user; 100 hosts, £15 per user (all prices exc VAT)
SUPPLIER Network Utilities 020 8390 9911   **INTERNET** www.funk.com
VERDICT A basic package offering simple remote-control and file-transfer tools at a low price. Good security but performance is unimpressive.

Funk Software's Proxy may have been around longer than many other products, but it has traditionally taken a simplistic approach, and is designed to provide nothing more than basic remote-control and file-transfer tools.

The software comprises two components: a master that allows a user to control another system and a host utility that must be loaded on each client. Installation could be improved – for example, we found it annoying that a licence code needed to be entered on every host installation when this could easily have been managed by the master component. The host can be deployed over the network, although this is achieved using a simple Windows utility and scripts that are run from the command line.

The master interface is a simple affair with five main options. It displays all discovered host systems, and on larger networks this can be narrowed down using IP or IPX polling ranges. Select a host from the list and you can opt to fire up remote-control or file-transfer sessions. Proxy also offers a remote printing facility, which allows a printer on a master system to be used by a host. The next option displays only those hosts with an active connection, and

Proxy maintains a full history log of all connection attempts. Systems that you regularly access can be placed in the Favourites folder, while Proxy's Cycling Monitor is able to display the screen on multiple systems in sequence, allowing you to monitor several systems at once.

Proxy provides basic security in the shape of host passwords, but it also cleverly leverages existing Windows security. Try connecting to Windows 2000 system, for example, and you'll be prompted for local login information, which will determine what access you have to the host's files. The connection interface is easy to navigate, with tabs at its base allowing you to swiftly cycle through remote control, file transfer or remote printing.

However, remote-control tools are limited, there are no chat facilities and we found file-transfer performance particularly poor. Host options are equally limited, although you can control access from a master system by granting or denying an incoming connection, rebooting or locking the system when a session ends, as well as limiting access based on time zones.

PC PRO RATINGS

|	
EASE OF USE	★★★★☆☆
FEATURES	★★☆☆☆☆
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★☆☆☆☆
OVERALL	★★★☆☆☆

LANDesk Instant Support Suite 2

PRICE 1-5 consoles, £1,330 each (exc VAT)
SUPPLIER LANDesk Software Europe 0118 902 6565   **INTERNET** www.landesksoftware.co.uk
VERDICT Simple, easily managed, help desk and support tools, with impressively swift client and console deployment.

Formerly part of Intel, LANDesk Software was rolled out in August 2002 as an independent company when the processor giant decided to focus more on its hardware products. Although LANDesk Management Suite is the flagship, the company swiftly released the Instant Support Suite products, which provide help-desk functions that can be rolled out with the minimum of fuss.
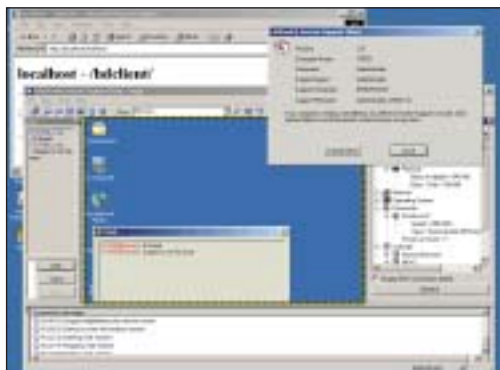
The Pro version provides secure support over the Internet, while the version on review is aimed at the LAN environment. Deployment doesn't get any easier – you install the software on your intranet server, set up shares and tell users which web page to go to when they call for support. Click on the link and the client software will be loaded onto their system, making it accessible to the console component.

Once the session has finished, the client software automatically uninstalls itself without leaving a trace behind. The system then becomes unavailable until the user downloads the client again. A resident client is also supplied and can be used for providing permanent remote-control tools for systems such as servers.

The console is just as easy to install and can also be deployed via a web page. Pricing is only based on the console, which LANDesk reckons can control up to 300 clients. Domain authentication provides the security, as console users must be members of specific groups before they're allowed to access client systems. At startup, the console interface lists all systems currently available for connection and selecting one fires up a remote-control session. A separate Advisor console is also provided for passively viewing a client system.

File operations are conducted in a separate Explorer window, where we found transfer performance to be comparatively good. You can open up a text-based chat session with a user, remotely reboot their system and employ basic drawing tools to highlight areas of their screen.

Inventory is also provided, although this is probably the weakest part of Instant Support Suite, as it only provided information about the main hardware components on client systems, while virtually all applications other than Internet Explorer went unnoticed. Even so, we found the software a delight to work with – the simplicity and ease of use for which it aims are largely achieved.

PC PRO RATINGS

EASE OF USE	★★★★★☆
FEATURES	★★★☆☆☆
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★☆
OVERALL	★★★★★☆

LapLink Everywhere Deluxe

PRICE 10 users, £110 per user; 100 users, £82 per user (all exc VAT)
SUPPLIER LapLink 0870 241 0983   **INTERNET** www.laplink.com
VERDICT The best remote access choice for single and mobile users, but not ideally suited to general support duties in large organisations.

Most IT users have heard of LapLink – its name is synonymous with the act of transferring files from one PC or laptop to another. The software has come a long way since its DOS days and this latest version offers a complete bundle comprising LapLink Gold 11, LapLink Everywhere, a remote network accelerator and a basic connection performance-monitoring tool.

LapLink Everywhere specifically targets mobile users, allowing them to access their home or office PC from any device capable of running a web browser. Its primary function is to facilitate remote access to your email, calendar and contacts, and is similar to GoToMyPC in that it's a managed service with the price including a one-year subscription.

LapLink Gold provides all the remote access components, but installation isn't geared up for large businesses, since it can't easily be deployed to multiple client systems. Furthermore, it doesn't use a small utility on client systems. Instead, the complete application has to be loaded before remote requests can be accepted. However, you'll find support for the widest range of connections – serial, parallel, USB, network, modem, Internet – and LapLink bundles a serial cable too.

The main interface is easy to navigate and provides quick access to each connection type.

LapLink defaults to a private system and you can use a login list of password-protected usernames, with each one allowed access to specific services and resources. Local settings may be password protected, links between PCs can be encrypted, and lockout prevents intruders from guessing passwords by repeatedly logging in.

LapLink hasn't forgotten its roots, so file synchronisation is as sophisticated as ever with an Xchange Agent to automate the process. Pairs of folders are selected along with a synchronisation 'direction' and there's no limit to the number of folder pairs an Agent can handle.

LapLink Gold is clearly one of the best choices if you need access to one or two systems and want a wide variety of connection options. The complete package makes it even more valuable to mobile users, but support staff will find the software cumbersome to install and manage in a large network environment.

PRO RATINGS	
EASE OF USE	★★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★★

Netopia Timbuktu Pro 5.1

PRICE 10 users, £47 per user; 100 users, £26 per user (all exc VAT)
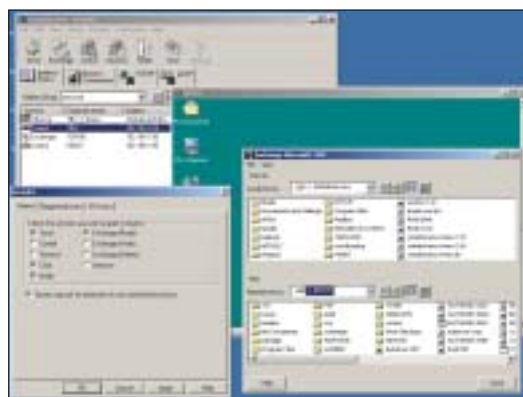**SUPPLIER** Computers Unlimited 020 8200 8282   **INTERNET** www.netopia.com
VERDICT A simple product to install and use, but the minimal features and sluggish file-transfer performance make it a poor choice as a support tool.

Timbuktu Pro is one of few remote-control products to support both Windows and Macintosh environments, and the price of the review product includes both options. Although file-transfer encryption isn't on offer, Timbuktu provides plenty of security alternatives, including a list of registered users maintained on each host, with each one assigned specific privileges. Guest access can also be implemented, so you may grant temporary access from the host.

You don't get a client or agent utility, so Timbuktu Pro must be installed on each host before it can be accessed. A network installer utility is available, although this is only able to push the software to Windows NT and 2000 systems and must be run from a Command Prompt. The main interface looks dated but is simple enough to understand and provides an address book for managing each connection profile. These are easily added by entering the IP address, DNS or WINS name of the target host and choosing a default service to launch on connection. A detailed activity log is maintained along with a complete connection history, and the list provided can also be used to quickly select and access a particular system.

The modest level of services provided by Timbuktu Pro will be sufficient for single users and small business, but make it less desirable as an enterprise-level support tool. Firing up remote control provides a single window to the host system and you can opt to control the system or passively view it. However, many useful features – such as remote reboot, sending keystroke combinations and annotation tools – are conspicuous by their absence. For the price, you'd also expect some form of web-browser access to be supported.

File transfer is also less well endowed – although you can use drag-and-drop to copy files, right-mouse-button actions aren't supported. We also found performance during the file copy tests unimpressive, with Timbuktu Pro lagging well behind the front runners.

Timbuktu Pro does at least offer a couple of unique features. A Notify option allows you to leave a request with another user to be informed when they become available, while a Send option allows files or folders to be attached to messages sent to a host.

PRO RATINGS	
EASE OF USE	★★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★★

Novell ZENworks for Desktops 4

PRICE 10 users, £50 each; 100 users, £50 each (all exc VAT)
SUPPLIER Novell 01344 724000   **INTERNET** www.novell.com
VERDICT Novell delivers powerful policy-based workstation management and good support tools, but installation is still messy.

This latest version of Novell's management software breaks away from the reliance on NetWare, as it can now operate in a Windows-only server environment and workstations no longer require the Novell client to be installed. However, to enjoy the benefits of policy-based workstation management, you have to endure a messy installation routine.

Before installing ZENworks for Desktops (ZfD) on your chosen Windows 2000 PDC server, you need to load the Novell Client followed by eDirectory. Annoyingly, neither is supplied in the package and has to be downloaded. No in-depth documentation is provided in the package either, so you have to trawl Novell's website to find out how to install and deploy ZfD. Even though the Novell client is no longer required, you still need to install a management agent on each system – and note that

Windows 95 and ME clients aren't supported.

Your next task is to set up the automatic workstation import (AWI) policy, which gathers information about systems as users log on and populates the NDS tree with these details. You decide which containers in the tree you want to store this information in and create a server package with the AWI policy enabled. It's here that ZfD 4 scores highly over other products, as

you use policies to determine what actions to carry out on clients or what services are to be made available. By assigning policies to containers via eDirectory, you're able to easily apply different settings to specific groups of clients and change them on the fly.

Inventory policies can be used to run regular scans of all workstations in the associated container, although the levels of information gathered by ZfD are unimpressive. Workstations may be accessed simply by selecting them from the NDS tree and choosing an action from the drop-down menu, and different remote-control settings can be applied to determine what levels of access support staff are allowed.

General support tools are reasonable, although not as numerous as those offered by products such as NetSupport Manager. Basic file-transfer tools are provided, plus you can wake up Wake-on-LAN-compliant systems and remotely execute applications, but that's about it. Overall, ZfD offers a comprehensive range of workstation support tools, but if you're new to eDirectory expect a steep learning curve.

PC PRO RATINGS

|	
EASE OF USE	★☆☆☆☆☆
FEATURES	★★★★★☆
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★☆☆☆☆
OVERALL	★★★☆☆☆

PCI NetSupport Manager 8

PRICE 10 users, £48 each, 100 users, £34 each (all exc VAT)
SUPPLIER Productive Computer Insight 01733 322505 **INTERNET** www.pci.co.uk
VERDICT A quality product that's very easy to use with an impressive range of features for the price. It even includes training tools plus hardware and software inventory.

As a support package, NetSupport Manager looks to have all the angles covered. It offers a comprehensive range of tools, with the majority neatly integrated into a single, intuitive interface. Selecting a host is simple, as you can browse the network and list all available clients or use specific characters or wildcards to narrow down the search.
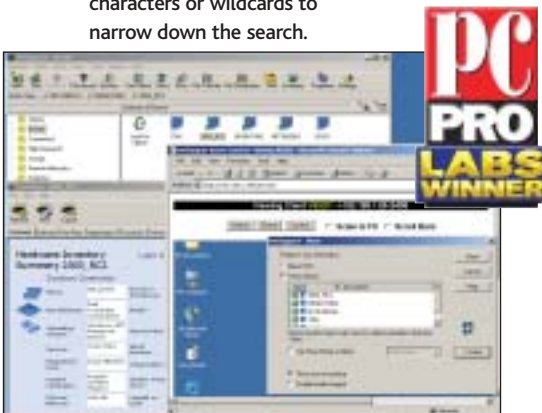
Double-clicking on a client fires up a remote-control session or you can use a drop-down menu to start up a file-transfer session, passively view user activity, have a chat or send a message.

Multiple systems may be selected for file distribution, although, contrary to the documentation, this doesn't deliver them simultaneously but to each client in turn. Systems can be rebooted or powered down and those with Wake-on-LAN-compliant network cards may be powered up on demand. If allowed, users can also contact a control system for a chat or to place a request for help.

Installation is simple and a separate utility eases the burden of client deployment, although this only supports Windows NT, 2000 and XP systems. However, it may be used to install or uninstall NetSupport components and deliver licence and configuration files.

Apart from support for NT domain

authentication, NetSupport looks after security itself and uses profiles to store various settings. You can decide what client interaction is allowed, hide all evidence of the client on their system and use encrypted keys to validate connection requests. Enabling web extensions causes the client to act as a simple web server, allowing it to be controlled directly via Internet Explorer. A scripting tool is provided for automating and scheduling support activities, and it's possible to broadcast training sessions to multiple users with the NetSupport Tutor.

Inventory is a bonus, as this is included in the price, and we liked the high level of detail for identified hardware and software components. The information is presented in a smart report that can be exported to a CSV file, but the NetSupport inventory database can't be searched if, for example, you're looking for systems with specific components. Even so, each report also has sections showing active applications, processes and services and, with the appropriate security clearance, you can stop and start these on remote systems.

PC PRO RATINGS

EASE OF USE	★★★★★☆
FEATURES	★★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★☆
OVERALL	★★★★★☆

Symantec pcAnywhere 10.5

PRICE 10 users, £115 each; 100 users, £98 each (all exc VAT)

SUPPLIER Symantec 020 7616 5600   **INTERNET** www.symantec.com

VERDICT Superb levels of security combined with excellent deployment tools. Comparatively expensive, but better suited than LapLink to corporate support duties.

If top-notch security is high on your list, Symantec's pcAnywhere won't disappoint. It starts by refusing to allow access to any host system without a valid username and password, beefs this up with features such as modem callback, limited login attempts and encryption, and tops it off with support for NT domain authentication, ADS, NDS and LDAP. And, if that's not enough, this latest version also includes a host-assessment tool that evaluates each connection type and advises on possible security risks.

The product scales well with demand and the full version on review includes a Package utility for remote deployment. There's a huge choice here – you can deploy selected pcAnywhere components with custom configurations and Symantec also includes a web server remote-installation option that we found only took a few minutes to set up. Option sets also allow different default settings to be applied easily to installation packages or to local systems.

Each system can either be a host, where it receives incoming requests, or a remote that controls other systems. The host component can be deployed easily and configured to run at system startup. The pcAnywhere Manager keeps your profiles and packages neat and tidy and it's possible to create custom profiles for specific connections. Remote systems can browse from a list of available network hosts and start with a remote-control or file-transfer session, or you're able to load both and swap easily between the two. The remote-control window offers controls for copying clipboard contents between systems, having text or voice conversations and sending restart and keystroke combinations. You can also record your actions for later playback, although we could find no way of broadcasting these files to multiple clients.

The file-transfer window is easy to use and supports drag-and-drop between guest and host. You get file and folder synchronisation, folder comparison and an automatic file-transfer tool, although LapLink's agent utility is far more elegant. Furthermore, LapLink provides a scheduler, whereas the only automation pcAnywhere offers is to run a job at startup or when a control session is initiated. Even so, along with the tough security measures and deployment tools, pcAnywhere is a far better candidate as a support aid.

PC PRO RATINGS	
EASE OF USE	★★★★☆☆
FEATURES	★★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★☆☆☆☆
OVERALL	★★★★☆☆

Vector Networks PC-Duo Enterprise Remote Control 7.1

PRICE 10 users, £56 each; 100 users, £37 each (all exc VAT)

SUPPLIER Vector Networks 01827 67333   **INTERNET** www.vector-networks.com

VERDICT Almost identical to the excellent NetSupport Manager, but the additional options for network, asset and licence management offered by Vector Networks will be worth considering.

Vector Networks has had a licensing agreement with NetSupport for many years, so you'll find PC-Duo Remote Control (PDRC) is virtually identical to NetSupport Manager (NSM). On review is version 7.1, but by the time you read this Vector will have released version 8, which brings it in line with NSM. There are, however, some noticeable differences, as PDRC is just one component of the PC-Duo Enterprise suite that provides a complete network management software package.

Software deployment is dealt with separately by a LANdeploy utility, which, although not as easy to use as NSM's utility, employs package definition files to remotely install clients on Windows NT, 2000 and XP systems. There's also evident duplication, as the PC-Duo Enterprise suite provides its own sophisticated hardware and software inventory, making the tools provided by PDRC pale into insignificance.

However, if you opt for PDRC, you won't be disappointed, as it provides a wealth of features. As you'd expect, the PDRC main control interface offers the same level of highly accessible support tools as NSM. These deliver easy access to client systems for remote control, viewing, file transfer and chat. Not only is security for controlling user access tight, but also the facilities for logging all types of activity. An audit trail feature keeps track of all actions, so you can easily find out when a client came online, which systems connected to it, what they did and even which files they accessed. You can also automatically record all actions taken on a client system during a remote-control session and replay them later on.

As with NSM, training tools are in abundance. A Show option allows you to broadcast the contents of your screen and all actions performed to any number of client systems simultaneously. File-transfer tools are also good, as drag-and-drop copying is supported along with basic directory synchronisation. However, this isn't as sophisticated as LapLink's agent – you can't choose a copy direction and the jobs can only be run manually. Still, it's worth noting that both NSM and PDRC delivered easily the best performance in the file-copy tests and by a significant margin.

PC PRO RATINGS	
EASE OF USE	★★★★★☆
FEATURES	★★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★☆☆
OVERALL	★★★★★☆