

## NetSupport DNA

Easy-to-use desktop management tool

By Paul Ferrill

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Last year we looked at NetSupport TCO from [NetSupport](#), which offered basic inventory capabilities and remote control. Since then, the company has launched an enterprise-level successor, NetSupport DNA, which adds [application](#) and Internet metering, software distribution and remote control. We recently tested this version, and while it still has a few warts, it does a great job of making a system administrator's job easier.

NetSupport DNA is ideally suited for a small to midsize business that doesn't need the enterprise-scale features of a systems [management](#) server. It also would appeal to companies with small IT departments looking for a product with a low learning curve and the need to get it up and running with minimal effort (See "[How we did it](#)").

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### Impressive interface

The first thing that caught our attention is a pleasing new user interface for the administrator's console that has tree views for grouping machines and tabs for different details. The system offers a nice use of footnote tabs for user views and reporting that changes the way information is displayed. Groupings include different categories, such as hardware and software inventory, application and Internet metering, and software distribution.

### Hardware and software inventory

NetSupport DNA shines when it comes to inventory. On the hardware side, the information gathered is detailed and accurate - right down to the size of the memory chips in each slot on a client's motherboard. Basic information is reported for each workstation on the administration console in tabular form or in a report form that uses Crystal Reports. Reports can be saved in multiple formats.

For software inventory, the screen displays a familiar icon for the application, a description of the application, software version, filename and path. We liked the hot-fix detail area, which listed specific hot fixes with a green check if it verified correctly, a yellow question mark for uncertain (such as an older patch that has been superseded and can't be completely verified), and red X if the hot fix failed. Hyperlinks for each of the hot fixes take you to a description page on the Microsoft Web Site.

The DNA Database Query tool lets you build specific reports quickly and easily. You don't have to know SQL to create a simple query, and you can export the results in any supported format. Each query you create is saved for future use.

## **Software distribution and metering**

We were a bit disappointed with the system's software distribution features. You are limited to building a distribution package from a list of files or folders. You will need a third-party tool, such as those from InstallShield, NetInstall or Wise, to build custom distribution packages for doing things like adding icons, creating Start Menu items or making registry changes. We would have liked to see a more robust package-builder tool or a bundled tool from NetSupport. For application healing, you have to rely on Microsoft Installer features packages and a network share drive. Although the task can be accomplished, the software doesn't help much with the process, other than to distribute the installer files to the clients.

The system does a good job of gathering application-usage statistics and displaying them in an easy-to-read bar graph. This same information can be exported into other applications, such as Excel, for further analysis.

## **Remote control**

The basic NetSupport DNA remote-control tools offer all the features you'd expect, including the ability to watch, share or control a client's screen, messaging and text chat. NetSupport offers a separate, more sophisticated remote-control module, NetSupport Manager (NSM). The NSM module includes many features also found in the DNA product, such as hardware/software inventory and file distribution. But it also has the capability of working through a gateway for connecting to PCs behind a firewall and a scan feature that monitors multiple remote workstation screens simultaneously. We did not test NSM for this review.

## **Other features**

At a large company it's important to be able to group client machines by a common factor, such as department, CPU speed or operating system. The administrator's console includes a feature called Dynamic Groups, which lets you build new groupings on the fly and view a subset of machines in a tree view similar to Microsoft's Windows Explorer. A search tool lets you look for a machine by computer name, e-mail address, IP address, location or username.

The system also lets you monitor Internet usage in addition to its standard application-metering feature. This tool monitors all Internet traffic by workstation and saves both the URL visited and the amount of time spent at that site.

## Installation and documentation

Installing the NetSupport DNA application couldn't be easier. The client discovery and deployment tool scans a range of IP addresses on your network and displays the computer name, IP address, media access control address, software


platform and DNA client version if installed. Installing a client (if you have local administration rights), is as simple as clicking the 'Deploy' button. For Windows XP machines you might have to alter a security setting for this to work.

## Bottom line

NetSupport DNA is easy to install and use. It excels in information collection and display, with a focus on utility. While you won't find many of the patch management and security features as Microsoft's SMS 2003, it does a good job identifying specific hot fixes for the operating system and for major applications.

## RELATED LINKS

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NetSupport DNA

<b>RATING</b> <span style="font-size: 1.2em; font-weight: bold;">3.45</span>	<b>Company:</b> <a href="#">NetSupport</a> <b>Cost:</b> \$32.40 per client for 1,000 nodes. <b>Pros:</b> Easy-to-use interface; simple client installation; good reporting tools; nice display of relevant software patches with references to the appropriate Microsoft Knowledge Base article. <b>Cons:</b> Software distribution requires additional software to build custom install packages; advanced remote-control tool requires a separate install.
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The breakdown	
Hardware/software inventory <b>30%</b>	<b>4</b>
Software distribution <b>30%</b>	<b>3</b>
Other features <b>20%</b>	<b>3</b>
Remote control <b>10%</b>	<b>4</b>
Installation <b>5%</b>	<b>4</b>
Documentation <b>5%</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>TOTAL SCORE</b>	<b>3.45</b>

**Scoring Key:** 5: Exceptional; 4: Very good; 3: Average; 2: Below average; 1: Consistently subpar