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Client systems get better management tools

By [Denise Dubie](#), Network World, 09/19/05

Managing client devices presents a conundrum to IT managers looking to monitor activity, secure systems and improve performance across disparate machines that require constant attention and upkeep.

Best practices would dictate standardization as the logical way to monitor thousands of like systems, but achieving homogeneity among client devices is nearly impossible. Desktops - and other client devices such as laptops and PDAs - can vary widely across a large company. Diversity among machines can range from the applications end users employ to various versions of operating systems to customized interfaces and the hardware sitting on the desktop.

"We are a schizophrenic organization. On the one hand, we are corporate and have standardized machines and controls in place, and on the other hand, we are like a college campus with unknown devices logging on to our network," says Ethan Fener, associate director of IS for Partners HealthCare Systems in Wellesley, Mass. "We have about 27,000 machines that are closely aligned and potentially an equal number of IP addresses for machines that are not standard. There is no way to achieve 100% certainty and visibility into each machine."

But users are trying the use of client-management systems is on the rise. According to a 2004 Forrester Research survey of 137 IT managers, 92% of companies use client-management tools or software, while 69% of small and midsize businesses (SMB) report doing so, as well. In response, vendors have augmented their products to better address the range of capabilities needed to tackle client systems.

For instance, [HP acquired Novadigm](#) to improve its client-management tools and recently made available a scaled-down version of its software to appeal to the fast-growing SMB market, which Yankee Group estimates includes about 6 million companies with two to 1,000 employees. Companies such as Symantec and BigFix have expanded capabilities in their software suites beyond security and patch management, respectively, to include more systems-management capabilities.

And Altiris, LANDesk and Computer Associates have augmented their systems-management portfolios with more security-specific offerings, such as spyware detection. Yet Microsoft leads the market for client-systems management, possibly because the company included SMS with its Back Office bundle, and SMS was often sold as part of corporate license agreements, Forrester speculates.

Adding to the management challenge, client systems demand much more than availability monitoring. IT managers must track end-user systems for security, compliance, software license and inventory purposes, among other things. In fact, the coming together of once-separate IT tasks is probably best demonstrated when managing client machines. Consider patch management, which couples vulnerability scans and configuration management with software distribution capabilities.

"There is a big convergence right now in terms of endpoint management. The whole operational discipline is becoming critical for security," says Peter Firstbrook, a research director at Gartner. "Standardization would be great, but it's not likely, so IT managers need to get processes and procedures in place that technology can ultimately automate for both operations and security management on endpoints."

To address the issues, IT managers tend to cobble together multiple vendor products with time-consuming manual efforts. Fener couples Reflectent EdgeSight software for monitoring client machines with Altiris tools for software distribution.

The standard machines at Partners HealthCare Systems are built so that patch management, anti-virus and group policies can be strictly enforced. Fener says owners of "non-standard machines are strongly encouraged to adopt similarly good management practices, in which anti-virus protection and patch management capabilities are made available yet not mandatory."

Despite the technology in place, Fener still has to manually address some issues. He explains, for instance, that if he achieves a 90% success rate in rolling out a patch to 27,000 machines, 2,700 machines remain that must be addressed one by one. "Scale is a different issue when it comes to managing desktops," he says.

Craig Bush, network administrator at Exactech, an orthopedic and medical device provider in Gainesville, Fla., uses Microsoft Windows Update service to scan and patch nearly 225 end-user machines, primarily because it's free. He also has Symantec anti-virus in place and ScriptLogic's Desktop Authority software to remote-control into client machines. And he manually performs asset inventory. In a smaller company, he faces challenges similar to a larger one, but does not have the resources to roll out a large systems-management tool that encompasses systems and security.

"It would be nice to have one management console. We centralize management as much as possible now, but something like SMS is too large a product to implement, is very expensive to roll out and probably very complex to configure and administer," Bush says. "We'd need another full-time person to manage that."

Matt Giblin, senior systems analyst at Mercy Health Services in Baltimore, approaches client management differently. He decided upon one vendor, Altiris, which he says he believed could address the spectrum of management and security needs.

"We wanted to combine our client-management system with our help desk without integrating into other systems," he says. Standardizing with one management vendor helped Giblin manage the life cycle of the devices, from provisioning to retirement. "We wanted to be able to track the cost, performance and life of an asset once it enters our environment for performance and budgetary purposes," he says.

Yet he still finds challenges in managing client devices. Among them is keeping up with systems and software; despite his best efforts to standardize the software and systems on machines, changes happen.

"The pendulum has shifted from hardware being difficult to support. Now the operating systems and applications are complex, and it has to get easier to support multiple operating systems and applications," Giblin says. "It's an always-changing environment, and it's critical just to keep up with the changes."

Industry watchers say such complexity is expected to grow for enterprise companies.

"The current approach to managing the devices will fail in time as systems get more complex and diversity increases, such as with Linux on the desktop," says David Friedlander, a senior analyst with Forrester. "It's already a challenge to standardize and maintain one operating system, remove complexity and reduce overhead in managing end-user devices."

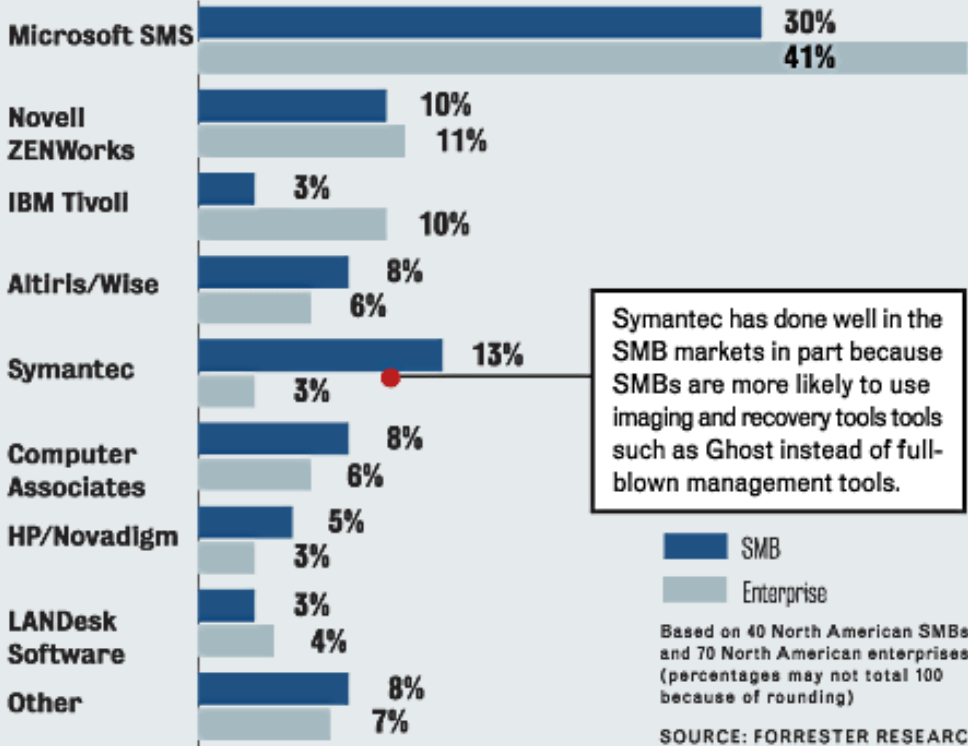
Friedlander says Forrester predicts client- systems management will evolve to include identity management and access control features, so that IT managers such as Giblin can more easily make the shift from managing hardware to managing the applications users tap most. For example, one user may use multiple devices, such as a desktop, laptop and a PDA. Challenges for future IT managers are expected to include synchronizing data among the devices specific to a user and managing users based on the applications and technologies they need.

"IT will need to manage the devices and the interactions between them," Friedlander says. "Users will need to be provisioned intelligently with the right applications, interface and information based on task requirements, location, network and the device."

Dominating desktops

When asked which client-management system they used, a majority of 110 IT executives indicated that large systems-management tools fit the bill.

Who is your primary vendor for commercial client-management software?



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