

NetSupport DNA:

Get to Know Your Network

How well do you know your network? NetSupport DNA will give you the complete picture.

August 2005 • by Chad Todd

Most of the time, it seems like IT pros have too many responsibilities. We have to handle day-to-day activities like troubleshooting desktop and server problems. We also have project work like rolling out a new server farm or updating desktops coming off their leases.

I don't know about you, but my least favorite task of all is tracking software and hardware. Unless you're in a small environment and have a lot of time on your hands, this task can be completely overwhelming. Thankfully, NetSupport DNA makes the process a snap.

DNA not only gives you full hardware and software inventory, but also application and Internet metering and software distribution. You can also add a Web-based help desk and remote-control client with add-on modules that you purchase separately.

You'll need to install both server and client components. You can have the client pushed remotely from the server. The installation process is very easy—I had the server software installed and the client piece added to 15 machines in about 20 minutes (including reboots).

You manage DNA with the NetSupport DNA Console, which runs inside a java virtual machine (see Figure 1). It will run on any machine with Windows NT 4.0 or higher and IE 6.0. I found the DNA Console extremely easy to use—after about 20 minutes, I was zipping around like an old pro.



Figure 1. DNA tracks information on monitored computers, including what applications have been opened and how long they've been used. (Click image to view larger version.)

There are two ways to discover clients. DNA can search a range of IP addresses or use the browse list for a given domain or workgroup. Once you've installed the client on all machines, each one will report back to the server and register itself under its domain name. You can see in Figure 1 that there are five machines registered in the TC domain.

If there are a lot of machines in your environment, seeing them all grouped together may make them harder to manage. DNA supports separating them into static or dynamic groups. You manage the static group membership by manually adding and removing machines. In Figure 1, I created two static groups, Sales and Support.

You can build your dynamic groups on the fly. DNA can track the following types of computers in dynamic groups:

- Windows 2000
- Windows XP
- Machines running IE 6.0 or higher
- Machines using Intel CPUs
- Machines with more than 128MB RAM
- Machines with XP SP2

REDMOND RATING	
Documentation 15%	8
Installation 10%	9
Feature Set 35%	8
Performance 30%	8
Management 10%	9
Overall Rating:	8.2
<hr/>	
Key:	
1: Virtually inoperable or nonexistent	
5: Average, performs adequately	
10: Exceptional	

DNA collects an impressive amount of data. Each of the tabs in the DNA Console details pane shows numerous statistics about the selected machine. DNA reports on:

- Operating system version and serial number
- Total RAM
- DirectX version
- Domain or workgroup membership
- Service pack level
- Currently logged on user
- Processor and clock speed
- Motherboard manufacturer and model number
- Availability of PCI, AGP and ISA slots
- All installed software

The User Details tab has fields to enter information about the person to whom the machine is allocated for tracking purposes. These fields include:

- Employee name
- Employee phone numbers
- Employee e-mail address
- Asset tag number
- Machine serial number
- Lease start and end dates
- Maintenance start and end dates

Keeping Watch

Besides giving you an elaborate inventory of your hardware and software assets, DNA also provides Internet and application metering. Internet metering is a great way to see where your employees are spending their time on the Web. For example, a user playing pinball on his lunch break may not be breaking company policy, but someone who plays five hours of pinball is definitely crossing the line.

DNA's Internet metering reports on Web sites visited with a particular machine. Although the Internet is required for a lot of businesses, employees can waste a lot of time surfing; DNA shows how much time is spent on each given Web site. This is a great way to track employee productivity.

Pricing Details

You can purchase NetSupport DNA and any its related modules a la carte. The ultimate price per user depends on how many modules you'll need.

- The basic inventory module starts at \$26.88 each for 100 users
- The inventory module and DNA remote control is \$53.76 each for 100 users
- The inventory module and NetSupport Manager is \$69.89 each for 100 users
- The inventory, metering and distribution modules are \$53.76 each for 100 users
- The above modules and DNA remote control are \$69.89 each for 100 users
- The above modules and NetSupport Manager remote control are \$80.64 each for 100 users

In addition to tracking Internet usage, DNA lets you restrict which Web sites your users can visit. This is good for blocking an occasional Web site or two, but I don't see it as an efficient method of controlling Internet traffic. You have to manually enter each URL, which adds quite a bit of labor and overhead to the process.

Application metering reports on which applications were used during the day and how long each was used. DNA's application metering function also lets you restrict which applications can be used. You can block an application all of the time or only during certain times. For example, you may want to let your employees play games during lunch only or before and after production hours.

Pushing Packages


DNA also lets you distribute software. You define packages that include a collection of files to be deployed. After creating a package, you can have it automatically pushed to machines or advertised for users to access and install when needed (this is similar to assigning and publishing applications with Group Policy).

You can include action parameters in the package to automatically answer any user prompts required during installation. This lets you deploy software packages without requiring any user intervention.

You can configure each package to check the hardware and software inventory already collected for the target machine to make sure the package is compatible. This ensures that you don't install software on a machine that won't support it or be able to run it properly.

When pushing packages out to an entire enterprise, you may overwhelm your DNA server. To alleviate this situation, DNA lets you assign other computers as "warehouse" machines. The DNA server pushes the application to the warehouse machines. Those machines, in turn, push it to the clients. This reduces the load on the DNA server.

I was impressed with DNA's feature set. If you need a utility to take a thorough inventory of your software and hardware assets, download DNA and give it a try.

The application and Internet metering are nice features to help track and manage employee productivity. All in all, NetSupport has done a great job with this version of DNA. 

Chad Todd, MCSE, MCT, CNE, is the author of Hack Proofing Windows 2000 Server by Syngress Publishing. He is the co-owner of Training Concepts, which specializes in Windows 2000 and Cisco training. You can contact Chad about "Get to Know Your Network" at chad@trainingconcepts.org.

Product Information Box

Product: NetSupport DNA

Company: NetSupport Inc., 770-205-4456

Price: Pricing ranges from \$26.88 (for basic inventory module) to \$80.64 per user (for all optional modules) for 100 users