10 things to look for in a remote connectivity application

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Remote access to workplace PCs and servers is no longer a luxury. Many organizations require that staff, technology administrators, and business owners regularly connect remotely to central or branch office systems, whether they're traveling, working from home, or visiting another site.

However, not all remote connectivity applications are created equal. Windows' own Remote Desktop Connection typically requires server support to deliver direct access to multiple remote systems in the same location. Worse, its printing capabilities can prove difficult if not impossible to configure without the support of third-party products. Some remote connectivity applications require special firewall configurations, while others deliver strong security features but at the expense of performance. Here are 10 things to look for in remote connectivity applications to ensure your organization deploys an effective remote access solution.

1 High performance

Few experiences prove more frustrating than having to complete a lot of work via a slow remote access connection. Thoroughly test remote connectivity applications prior to selection and deployment to make sure the platform you choose provides acceptable performance. Only by testing a remote access utility in your real-world environment -- complete with your office's unique collection of various DSL and cable modem links, firewalls, and various Windows workstations and servers -- can you be certain the platform delivers the performance you need.

2 Strong security

Employees, tech staff, and business owners often must access, process, and update business-sensitive information via remote connections. Thus, it's imperative that the remote access technology in use provide appropriate security. It makes no sense to invest heavily in security, including servers to authenticate users and restrict file access, only to open your organization's data by deploying an insecure remote access application.

Look for a remote connectivity application that requires authentication to complete remote connections and that encrypts the actual contents of the remote access sessions. Several leading products deliver 256-bit SSL encryption; settle for nothing less.

3 Simple client-side configuration

Organizations must remember that their employees are public relations practitioners, marketing experts, sales professionals, and financial specialists; such staff are typically neither well trained nor comfortable when it comes to installing and configuring remote access software. So it makes sense to adopt remote access client-side applications that are easily installed and configured.

Avoid remote access solutions that require much client-side configuration or administration. Ideally, client-side setup and configuration will be as simple as double-clicking an install file, following basic installation prompts, and supplying a workstation name or address, username, and password.

4 Firewall-free configuration

Any time organizations select a remote access application that requires client-side firewall configuration, technology administrators can plan on trouble. If the remote access solution requires specific firewall ports to be opened, it's doubtful that employees will either know how to properly configure those firewall settings (such as on their own broadband routers) or have the necessary knowledge and administrative rights to configure hotel and other corporate network firewalls to permit the necessary traffic.

For this reason, you should look for remote access programs that don't require firewall adjustments on the client-side network. Increasingly, remote connectivity solutions are moving away from requiring firewall adjustments, but some still require such changes. They are to be avoided if possible.

5 Simple installation

There's no reason IT administrators should overly complicate their own roles, either. The easier a remote access solution is to install on the host side the better. Whether deploying a hardware- or software-based solution, host-side setup and administration should be kept to a minimum. Few server, network, and firewall changes should be required.

6 Local printing support

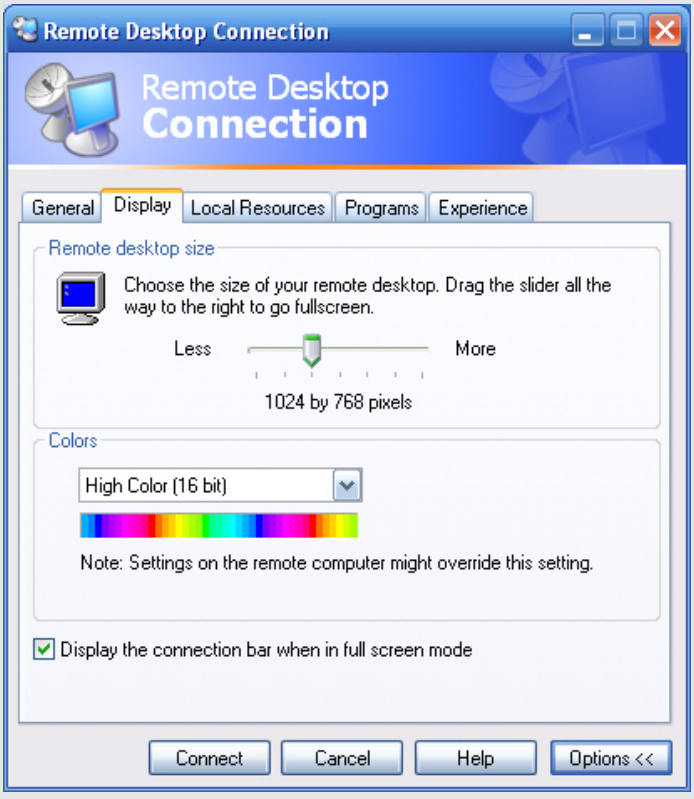
Printing is perhaps the biggest stumbling block when it comes to remote access solutions. Although most programs perform relatively well and deliver acceptable security, few make it easy for users to print the contents of remote applications and systems using their local printer.

In the case of Windows Remote Desktop Connection, third-party manufacturers have developed add-on software that readily solves the issue. However, the required licensing costs per user are significant. Seek a remote access application that automatically configures users' default local printers to print application and system data from the remote system locally.

LogMeIn Pro automatically configures a user's local printer to serve as the default printer during a remote access session.

7 Easily adjusted display settings

To optimize efficiency, users must be able to easily update display settings, too. This is particularly true today, when many organizations are deploying widescreen displays. Those widescreen displays, when accessed from a standard 17" monitor, could prove frustrating for end users unable to fit the contents of the remote system on their desktop displays. By making sure that users can adjust the remote display settings to match their local monitor resolution, you'll help improve user productivity and reduce support desk calls.



Windows XP's (and Vista's) Remote Desktop Connection makes it easy for users to adjust the resolution size of the remote desktop. They just need to click the Options menu, select the Display tab, and adjust the resolution size appropriately.

8 File transfer capabilities

Many remote access applications deliver simple remote access capability. However, some remote access programs also include separate easy-to-use file transfer utilities that simplify transferring large numbers of files (and even folders en masse) from a remote office workstation to a laptop or other system. The feature is particularly handy when traveling employees must frequently update or replace large numbers of files.

9 Simple license management

License management is a little-discussed issue, but it bears mentioning. If a remote access application is rolled out for an employee who subsequently leaves the organization, it's best if the organization can roll that license over to the new staff member who replaces that employee. Not all remote access programs permit such license rollovers, though, so you should review a remote access program's licensing requirements prior to making a purchase.

10 Quality support

Remote access solutions don't always work the way they're supposed to. Occasionally, trouble arises, whether due to software conflicts on a user's system or issues with an organization's network configuration. In such cases, you'll want access to quality technical support.

Although it's helpful to have a well-maintained Wiki, there are many occasions when IT departments may be required to contact the remote access manufacturer's technical support staff. Whether issues arise with Windows updates, cross-platform incompatibilities, or even conflicts with an antivirus or anti-spyware program, the required solution may not be available on a public support Web site or within supplied documentation.

Prior to purchasing a remote access solution, contact the vendor's support staff to determine how knowledgeable the customer service support staff is and how quickly it responds to trouble tickets.

Additional resources

- TechRepublic's Downloads RSS Feed XML
- Sign up for TechRepublic's Downloads Weekly Update newsletter
- Sign up for our IT Management NetNote
- Check out all of TechRepublic's free newsletters
- Consider these technologies and when building an enterprise remote access network (TechRepublic download)
- Configure Microsoft Windows Home Server to allow remote access (TechRepublic download)
- Master remote connections in Windows XP (TechRepublic download)

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