

On-Demand Remote Support

A report and review on the NetSupport 24-7 hosted remote support service from NetSupport Ltd

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Customer IT support has become a critical requirement for many businesses and a vendor's ability to deliver a timely and efficient service can be the difference between a happy customer and a lost business opportunity. Traditional telephone based support services are regularly coming under heavy attack in the media for being hopelessly inefficient, remarkably frustrating and rarely successful. One of the biggest problems with these services is they are measured not by the success rate of the individual support personnel but simply by the number of requests dealt with over a given period. In many cases the fact that the support request was not resolved satisfactorily is irrelevant to the provider as no mechanism is in place to gauge customer satisfaction.

Clearly a new approach to providing IT support services to customers and end users is needed and remote access is becoming an increasingly popular alternative. It's common knowledge that many companies have overworked and understaffed support departments struggling to cope with user's demands so the tools that allow them to access a user's desktop and troubleshoot it without having to be physically present are going to have a major positive impact on efficiency. Remote access has many other uses as companies providing bespoke software applications or services, for example, often insist on remote access being made available 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. This applies equally to system integrators and consultants and particularly where IT services have been outsourced.

For many years remote control software has been the answer to this problem. Using the 'guest' component of the software it allows administrators and support personnel to access a 'host' system and remotely view it or take control. It still works very well within a LAN environment but with the Internet in the equation it has a number of drawbacks. A key concern is cost as remote control software is not an effective solution for supporting a large remote user base due to the initial expenditure and ongoing yearly licensing and upgrade fees. There are also manpower and training issues as the host software must be deployed to each desktop and users must be knowledgeable in its use. Security is a major issue as the host component must always be loaded and ready to receive incoming requests from a guest. The facilities for encrypting transmissions are often not available whilst proprietary encryption methods can hit performance. Perhaps one of the biggest concerns is that most standard remote control software products don't work well with firewalls and will often require custom ports to be opened to allow two-way communications between support staff and remote users.

Hosted remote access services are proving to be an ideal solution as they overcome all of the problems presented by the standard software alternatives. Overall costs are much lower as many services can be purchased on a monthly or yearly subscription basis and they can be easily tailored to suit an individual company's requirements. Where hosted services are completely web based there are no requirements for end user training as in most cases they simply visit a designated page on the company's web site and request support directly from there. Zero deployment requirements means the support burden is reduced even further as no software needs to be installed permanently on user's desktops. Security is also far superior as remote desktops can only be accessed by support staff using the same service account and in most cases only once local permissions have been granted. Perhaps the biggest bonus is that by using HTTPS as a tunneling transport all communications are encrypted and firewalls generally need no further configuration to allow this type of traffic through.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Businesses that are providing technical support to customers and end users are facing many challenges today in the drive to deliver an efficient service. As telephone support lines come under increasing criticism they must look to other solutions that will allow them to respond swiftly to service requests, maximize the effectiveness of their support staff, deliver greater customer satisfaction and capitalize on business opportunities.

On-demand Internet based customer support is becoming the response of choice to these requirements and there are a growing number of solutions already in this rapidly expanding market space. The benefits are immediate as the service is managed and maintained by a third party provider. This reduces the time and costs associated with deployment and administration of standard solutions so a fast return on investment (ROI) can be realized. Virtually no training is required as end users and customers simply visit a designated page on the company web site and by using the Internet as the communications medium it breaks down all barriers imposed by location allowing organizations to provide a truly global support service.

The aim of this report is to take an in-depth look at the new NetSupport 24-7 service being offered by NetSupport Ltd in order to determine its suitability for providing hosted on-demand support facilities to a range of businesses. It will review the evaluation, procurement and installation processes, look at deployment and ease of use and see how its feature level stacks up against competing products. The report will look at the end user experience to see what facilities are provided for initiating a support request and how well this is presented to the central support department to allow them to respond in a timely fashion. Security is a key requirement of these types of hosted services so the report will also review how these are implemented and what tools are provided to ensure the end user's or customer's desktop can be secured against unauthorized access.



Our testers concluded that NetSupport 24-7 provides one of the best evaluation services. You register at the NetSupport 24-7 web site after which you can use the full service for 14 days which gives companies ample opportunity to evaluate the services on offer. The process is very simple as no telephone calls are required to activate remote support. There is no delay between registration and activation so the service can be used immediately. Netviewer one2one requires a utility to be emailed to the evaluator which can take up to 24 hours. GoToAssist does provide an evaluation service but the company must be contacted first either by telephone or by registering to be contacted by a sales representative. We tested the latter by registering with GoToAssist whereupon it took nearly two weeks for the company to respond. We were asked to call a mobile number and after discussing an evaluation we were advised that the package would take a further 48 hours to deliver. Pricing information will also only be made available on request.

Danware's NetOp On Demand takes a similar approach to Netviewer as the evaluation verification process takes around 24 hours after which you are provided with a download location for NetOp Guest, Gateway and Host utilities. The Gateway and Guest comprise a 17MB download whilst the Host is made available to end users either from the Danware web site or from your own page. We were also emailed by two sales representatives prior to the evaluation being made available. We found procurement of NetSupport 24-7 just as simple as evaluation. The entire sales process is web based and two different subscription plans make the service very cost effective. You can opt to pay based on the number of times you anticipate requiring a remote control connection to the end user. NetSupport 24-7 always begins in a chat mode where the support staff and user can discuss a problem via a text based conversation but this is not considered a remote control link so is not charged as such.

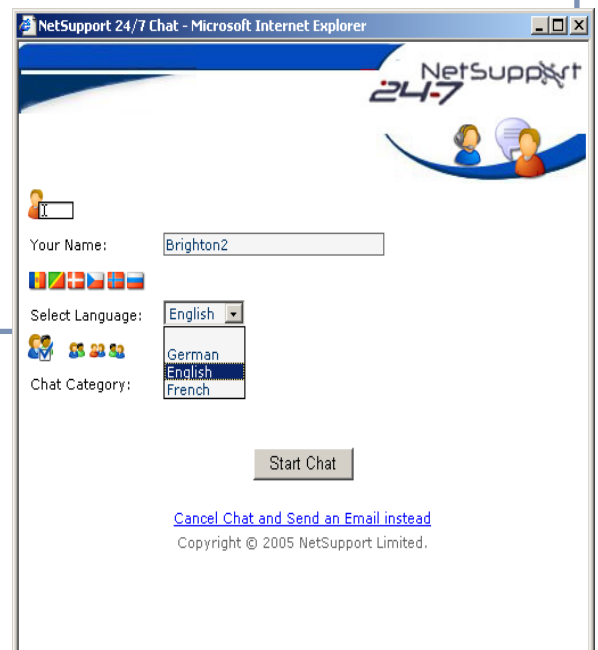
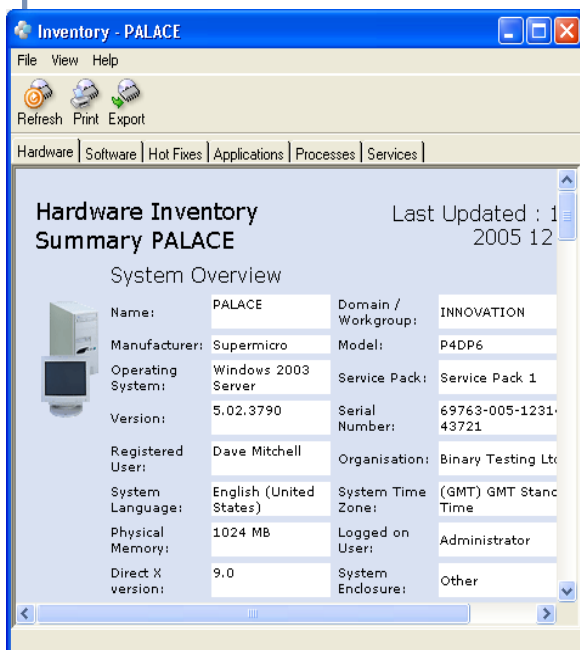
NetSupport 24-7 is very flexible as even if all allotted remote control sessions are used up before the subscription period is renewed then extra connection licenses can be purchased online immediately. The second option is to choose a subscription plan based on the number of operators you wish to use. There are no restrictions on the total number of operator accounts that can be created but only on the number of concurrent connections. As with the usage based plan you can purchase more concurrent operator connections as and when required. Installation doesn't get any easier as there is no requirement for any utilities to be permanently loaded on either the operator or client systems. Netviewer one2one, for example, requires the technician to run a small consultant utility directly from a shortcut on their desktop. Danware's NetOp On Demand functions in a similar fashion to Netviewer although this solution requires a special version of the NetOp Remote Control Guest module to be installed along with a Gateway component. The NetOp Host is also configured during registration to specifically use the IP address of your firewall. For NetSupport 24-7, the operator merely logs on to the main web site and is taken to the operator screen for that account. From here you can set up other accounts and a highly valuable feature is support for 26 different languages making this service an ideal choice for companies operating support over a range of geographical locations. From the user's perspective there is also little to do as once the account has been registered a small chunk of HTML code is generated which can be copied and pasted directly into the company's web site to provide one-button access to support. The URL will need to be emailed to customers but this can be achieved easily with a mailing campaign. All the customer needs to do is select the support button to initiate a chat session with an operator. A variety of buttons are provided ready for use or you can create custom images. Only when a remote control session is initiated by the operator it is necessary for a client utility to be pushed to the user's desktop where it is temporarily installed for the duration of the session.

CONFIGURATION AND EASE OF USE

Once the initial administrative account has been created further operator accounts are created from the main interface that is presented after logging on. Accounts can be allowed or denied administrator rights and different languages assigned to them. Operators can be placed in multiple groups that can, for example, be based on the departments or business areas they will be dealing with and on the languages they can offer to the customer. These also deliver another key advantage as operators can be placed in groups based on their areas of expertise so you could create groups that deal specifically with technical issues or sales support. This process only takes a few minutes to carry out and afterwards each operator will be sent an email advising them of the URL they need to visit to register themselves with the service.

A Client Setup option provides the tools for customizing how the service is presented to end users. You can pose a questionnaire asking for contact information about the user and details of their problem, add custom messages displayed during the session and decide whether to allow simultaneous connections from multiple operators. Features such as inventory can be enabled whilst encryption can be enforced. Groups are created from the Chat Setup page and you can set up a range of messages allowing operators to send predefined, or 'canned', instructions and messages to users with a single mouse click. There's much more as lists of custom URLs can be used for quick access from the operator panel whilst the support request button and chat page sent to the user can be customized. Another useful feature is the option for users to send an email request to a predefined address if no operators are available.

During testing we found NetSupport 24-7 very easy to get to grips with and initiating a support request from a user's desktop took only a few seconds. If multiple groups are configured the user is presented with a choice where they can select their primary language and the group they wish to contact. Once a request has been sent by the user it will appear in the operator window and selecting an entry opens up a two-way text based conversation. If remote control, inventory or file transfer is required the operator needs to push a utility to the selected user. Some work is required here for Windows XP SP2 users as pop-ups needs to be unblocked although this can be done permanently for the support site only. The user also needs to permit the download of the executable before it can be run. However, the process takes less than a minute after which the operator has access to the user's desktop according to the permissions defined during the client setup phase.



FEATURES

A key feature of this service is that it has the company's excellent NetSupport Manager (NSM) remote control software at its foundation which has consistently proved to be one of the best performing remote access solutions on the market. Once a remote access session has been initiated the operator is presented with the standard NSM main interface which provides easy access to an impressive range of options and tools. Performance between the operator and user can be tweaked by selecting from four screen resolutions although we did find the highest setting resulted in a noticeable drop in response.

The operator can elect to share the users screen or simply watch it and switch to full screen viewing if required. The file transfer tool opens with a two windows showing both the local and remote systems and file and directories can be copied or moved in either direction using nothing more than drag and drop. File transfer performance has always been a strong feature of the NetSupport products and it's worth noting that NetSupport 24-7 will only transfer deltas when existing files are found on the target. This gives a boost to performance, particularly when synchronizing files over the Internet, as only the detected changes are sent.

Another bonus of NSM is its inventory feature which allows the operator to gather plenty of information about hardware, software, processes and services. During testing we found the hardware inventory in particular was very accurate and provided a wealth of information about key components along with a complete rundown on used and available hard disk space. It also lists all Windows hotfixes and allows operators to select services on the remote system and shut down, restart and pause them. Annotation is a feature often missing from many remote access solutions but this is provided as well and allows operators to highlight areas on the user's desktop using a range of drawing tools.

The screenshot displays the NetSupport 24-7 Operator Console in a Microsoft Internet Explorer browser window. The console interface includes a sidebar with navigation options like 'Operator Console', 'Subscribe', 'Change Password', 'News', 'Reports', 'Feedback', and 'Logout'. The main area shows a table of active chats with columns for Visitor Name, Visitor IP Address, Chat Started At, Chat Group, Language, and Current Operator. Below the table are icons for 'Send Remote Control', 'Push a URL', 'End Chat', 'View PC', 'File Transfer', 'Inventory', and 'Leave Chat'. The 'Chat Time' is shown as 01:23:12.

Overlaid on the console is a 'PALACE - Viewing' window showing a remote session. The client interface includes a 'Your Name' field (filled with 'Palace') and a 'Send Message' field. A chat history shows messages from 'Carole Mitchell' regarding the NetSupport 24-7 Client. A central dialog box titled 'Remote Support requires the installation of this NetSupport 24-7 client' is displayed, providing instructions for installation and a 'SEND' button. The bottom right of the client window shows 'System Information' with details for Name: Palace and Contact Number: 00009999.

REPORTING

NetSupport 24-7 scores highly for its extensive reporting features. From the operator interface you can choose from a wide selection of predefined reports and view graphs and tables on chat sessions which can be broken down further into each language in use. The chat log is a valuable tool as you can see at a glance all operator activity plus a complete breakdown of individual usage and details of the customers and users they have dealt with. All support calls left unanswered are recorded and these are also broken down showing precisely which customers were not seen to and the amount of time they were kept waiting.

The chat history offers another advantage over telephone based support as all chat sessions are recorded on the NetSupport 24-7 web site. A complete history of all conversations is available to operators which can be used if further requests for ongoing problems are raised. Furthermore, end users and customers can request a complete transcript of their conversations and problem resolutions and have them sent to their email address.

One feature that NetSupport Ltd is very proactive with is automated user feedback. It provides this in its NetSupport School distance learning software and it also includes it with NetSupport 24-7. It's very simple to use as once a support call has been terminated the customer is shown a simple screen with five options that allows them to score the service and to leave a comment as well. All this information is collated on the NetSupport 24-7 web site and amalgamated into the main reporting facilities. This allows you to see how effective your overall support service is and also how well each individual operator is performing.

The screenshot shows the NetSupport 24-7 Reports page in a Microsoft Internet Explorer browser window. The address bar displays <https://www.netsupport247.com/Operator/Reports.asp>. The page features a navigation menu on the left with options like 'Operator Console', 'Manage Operators', 'Client Setup', 'Chat Setup', 'Manage Account', 'Subscribe', 'Change Password', 'News', 'Reports', 'Feedback', and 'Logout!'. The main content area is titled 'Reports' and lists several report types with brief descriptions:

- [Chat Log Report](#): This report displays a summary of completed chats for your company. The summary is divided into tables for each operator and shows the details and duration of the chat. The detailed history for each of the chat sessions can also be accessed from this report.
- [Chat Language Report](#): This reports show a summary of Completed Chats separated by each of the languages of your operators..
- [Chat Group Report](#): This reports show a summary of Completed chats separated by each of your defined Chat Groups.
- [Sign - in Report](#): This reports show a summary of when each of the operators for your company signed in and out of this system.
- [Company Summary](#): This report displays a summary of your companies configured operators and usage.
- [Remote Control Connection Log](#): This report shows all the connections that operators have made to remote clients whilst in a chat session.

Additional information on the page includes 'Your Evaluation Expires in 9 Days', 'Logged on Users' (listing Dave Mitchell, Test2, and Test3), and a VeriSign Secured logo. The footer contains links for 'Company | Contact | Privacy Policy | Copyright © 2005 NetSupport Limited.' and a 'Done' status bar at the bottom.

Security is a critical consideration when providing remote support services as the user's desktop must be protected from unauthorized access at all times. Furthermore, the mechanisms to control access permissions for support staff must also be in place. It is equally important that when providing support services to third parties that they are satisfied that their own business data and applications are secure.

NetSupport 24-7 provides a range of tough security measures which, naturally, start with encrypted transmissions. When operators and customers log on to the hosted service they do so over HTTPS and authentication is carried out on both user types. When a support connection has been established, NetSupport 24-7 defaults to not encrypting screen data sent between the operator and customer. However, during the client setup phase you can choose from four different levels of encryption to enforce and these range from 56-bit DES to full strength 256-bit AES.

As previously discussed the service does not require a utility permanently loaded on the user's desktop. This is unloaded when a session has terminated so blocking any further access. It's important to note that the ability of an operator to access a remote desktop lies in the hand's of the user. The operator panel only displays systems that have visited the support URL and specifically requested assistance. In chat mode the operator cannot access the remote desktop and the user also has to permit the download of the remote client utility before the operator can access their system.

Further restrictions can be applied to the features the operator can access and these are configured from within the client setup routine. You can stop operators from running inventory operations and also block them from interacting with the desktop's Windows services. The service can be fine tuned even further as the majority of operator controls can be enabled or disabled so you decide whether to allow screen sharing, remote control and file transfer. Program execution can be blocked and you can stop the operator from shutting down, rebooting or restarting the remote system.



CONCLUSION

The recent increase in the number of hosted remote support solutions shows there is a clear demand for these types of services as organizations look beyond traditional telephone based support. As a communications medium, the Internet provides clear advantages not only in reduced costs but with the ability to offer a truly global service. However, security is always an issue and a common feature of most hosted services is to remove the need to have a permanent client utility installed on user's and customer's desktops. Where we find services differing is in the methods whereby the support consultant or operator interacts with the service and their users. NetSupport 24-7 stands out as rather than use proprietary utilities such as those employed by Netviewer one2one and NetOp On Demand the operator simply visits the main NetSupport 24-7 web site and logs on to their personal account. As the process is entirely web based it has the added advantage that the operator is not restricted to a specific PC in order to provide support services.

We were particularly impressed with the slick evaluation and procurement processes provided by NetSupport 24-7. At no time were our testers required to converse with sales representatives and they were able to use all the services on offer immediately after registration - a system few other vendors currently offer. A key requirement of any hosted remote support must be ease of access and bringing sales staff into the equation with potential new customers can serve to slow the process down.

The use of service tickets and session identifiers by a number of solutions means the telephone is usually required as the initial line of contact as the user must call the support centre to receive this code before remote access can begin. NetSupport 24-7 moves completely away from any reliance on the telephone as this hosted service essentially functions as a central meeting point between the operators and users and doesn't require any codes entered prior to starting a remote support session. A range of strong security measures are provided to protect the customer's desktop from unauthorized access and the use of the NetSupport Manager client utility makes a wealth of features available for resolving support issues. Many other useful features are provided such hardware and software inventory and combining these with the ease of installation and use makes NetSupport 24-7 a top choice for organizations looking to provide a global on demand remote support service for end users and customers.

