The Network

Practical buying and strategic advice for IT managers and decision makers

BUSINESS FOCUS

Work smarter with remote support software

Dave Mitchell tests the time-saving tools that let your IT staff solve problems without leaving their desks
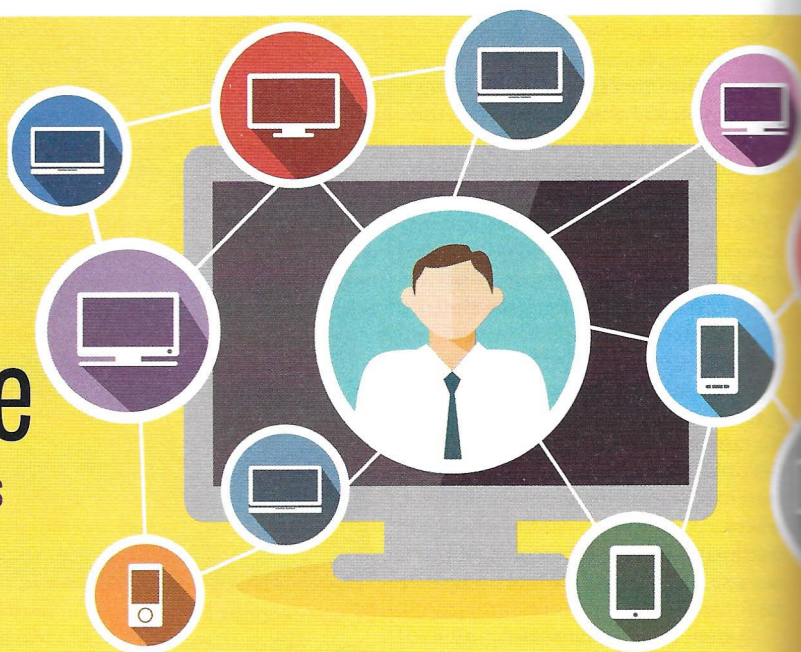
Whatever size your business is, your support department needs to be responsive. Resolving problems quickly keeps productivity losses to a minimum. Sadly, most support teams are overworked and understaffed. Few companies can afford to have technicians rushing out to examine users' systems in person every time an issue is reported.

That applies all the more for staff based in branch or remote offices – or, as is increasingly common, at home. A lengthy road trip is a highly inefficient use of resources, and anyone who's ever tried to troubleshoot over the telephone will tell you what a frustrating experience this can be.

Happily, there's a solution: remote support software, which lets technicians "take over" affected systems from afar, and investigate and fix problems without leaving the comfort of their own desk. This month, we've rounded up four remote support software solutions from some of the biggest names in the market – namely GoToAssist, NetOp, NetSupport and SolarWinds. Their software provides an impressive range of features, and we put each one through its paces in the lab to help you decide which one is right for your support department.

What's wrong with free software?

The first question you might ask is whether you need to spend money on remote support software at all. It's true that there are a great many free remote access products available, including the Quick Assist tool that's built into Windows 10. This allows anyone with a Microsoft account to take full control of a remote computer by simply exchanging a six-digit PIN with a remote user, and it can be very handy on the odd occasion when you need to help out a friend or family member. For a business environment,

BELOW The NetOp Remote Control agent provides a plethora of useful support tools
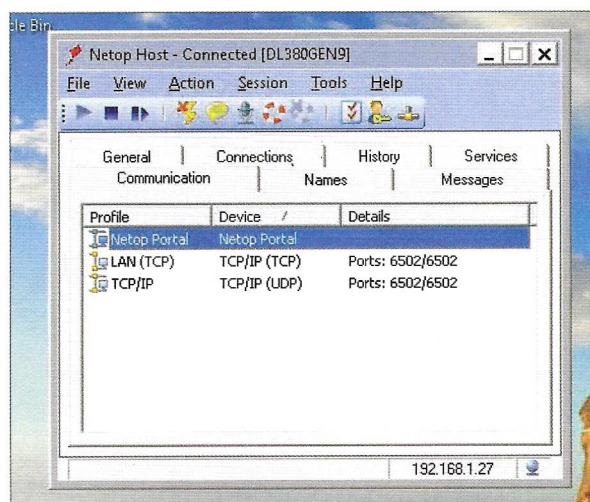
however, it's a non-starter: these free tools can punch a hole clean through your firewall, and are virtually impossible to manage and audit.

By contrast, all four products on test this month are designed to be highly secure, with features such as AES 256-bit encrypted connections and endpoint password protection.

They can also enforce access permissions for support staff, allowing you to decide what level of control is permitted for each one. That could be useful if your business offers multiple levels of support: you can allow first-line responders only to passively view a client's screen, while full remote control is limited to more senior personnel.

On-premises or cloud?

Some remote-support systems are hosted in the cloud by their vendors, while others run inside your company network and are managed by your own IT department.

The on-premises option is most suitable if you need total control over what can be accessed and by whom, and it's easier to set up than you might fear. The self-hosted products on review this month all had minimal hardware demands, and none of them took more than 10 minutes to install. The only potential gotcha arises when

it comes to accessing systems outside the local network. Some packages use a proprietary gateway that links multiple sites together over encrypted links – but check whether this is included as standard, as several only offer it as an option.

If you want to support a range of devices that are spread across multiple locations then a cloud-hosted support solution might be a better choice. These platforms make it easy to access all clients securely from a single web portal, no matter where in the world they're located. For the best of both worlds, consider a hybrid solution that teams up an on-premises console with a web portal, allowing you to support local systems via a fast LAN connection and use the internet to access remote ones.

■ Undercover agents

Remote support normally requires a small agent to be installed on client systems, to listen for incoming connections and allow technicians to access the machine. Some systems can provide various functions using Windows' built-in remote support features, but the key features – such as remote control and file transfer – typically require a proprietary agent.

On-premises solutions typically include tools to automatically push the agent software out onto multiple systems, so you can ensure that all clients are accessible. Alternatively, you can go for an on-demand support approach, where the agent is only loaded for the duration of the session, and automatically removed afterwards. Cloud-hosted solutions often handle this by allowing
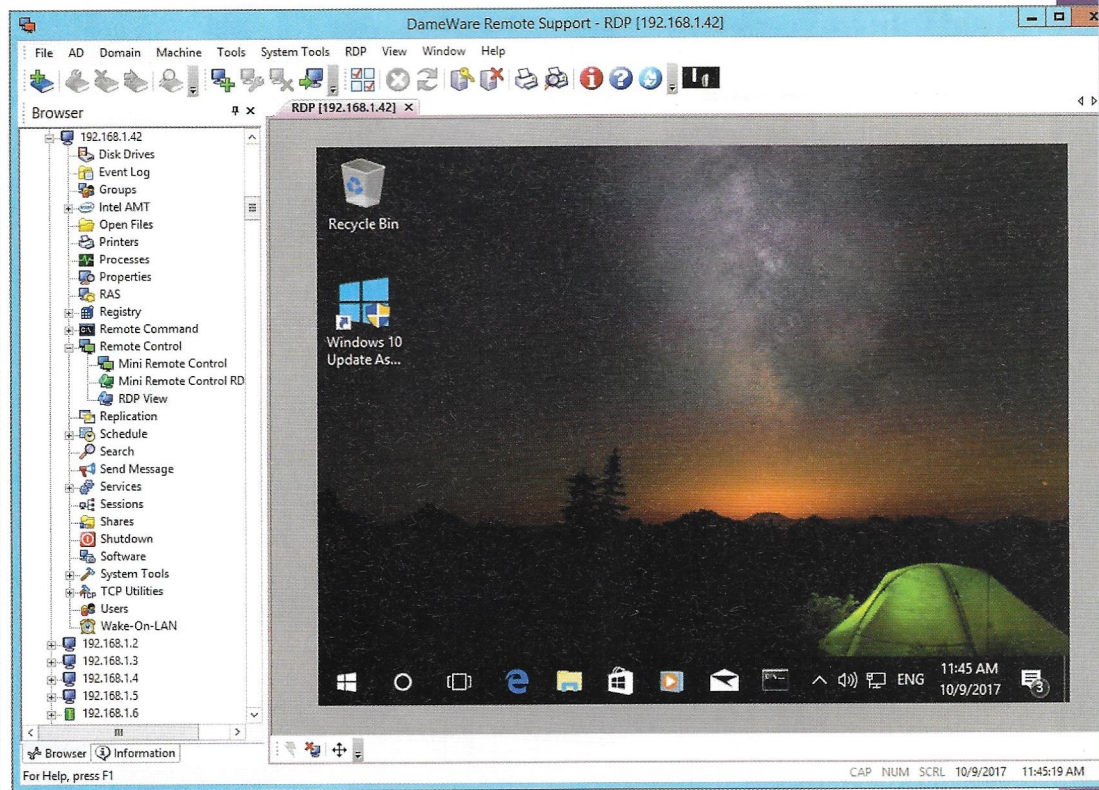
technicians to send connection requests to the client, possibly by email, who must then allow access.

This ensures that no-one can connect to your client PCs without express authorisation – reassuring, perhaps, if your users are dealing with confidential information. However, it also means that you can't access remote systems when the user isn't present. If this is an issue, look for cloud solutions that include an unattended agent which can be loaded permanently on selected systems.

ABOVE DameWare can use RDP for quick client connections and simple remote control

BELOW NetSupport stores hardware and software inventories on its host system

■ More features

Alongside standard remote-control services, many support products offer a range of useful extra tools, such as a file transfer extension that enables simple drag-and-drop copies between technician and client, facilities for text, audio and video chat between the user and the support agent, Registry editors and session recording.

Hardware and software inventory tools can be very useful too, as they enable technicians to check what's installed on the user's PC prior to starting a support session. On-premises solutions can use the host system to store client inventories, for enhanced efficiency and security.

All four remote-support products on test this month were able to connect to Mac clients as well as Windows systems, although the experience wasn't quite as slick. All platforms required the macOS agent to be manually deployed, and some advanced features such as inventory are not currently available.

And when it comes to iOS devices such as iPads and iPhones, remote control isn't possible at all, thanks to the operating system's strict security model. However, many vendors offer free iOS and Android apps that allow you to use your mobile to connect to and control client systems.

Even if remote-support software can't solve every problem, it can give a huge boost to the efficiency of your IT helpdesk team – and that in turn will boost business productivity. Read on to see which solution suits your business best.
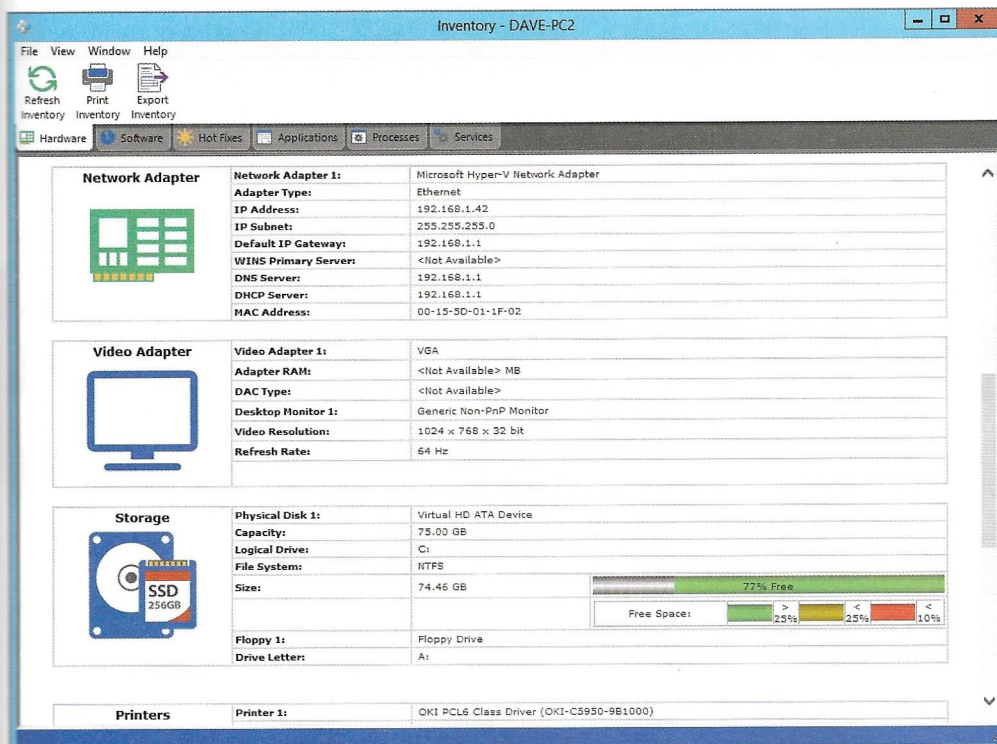
LogMeIn GoToAssist Remote Support 3.5

A cloud-hosted support platform that's perfect for SMBs seeking ease of use and low prices
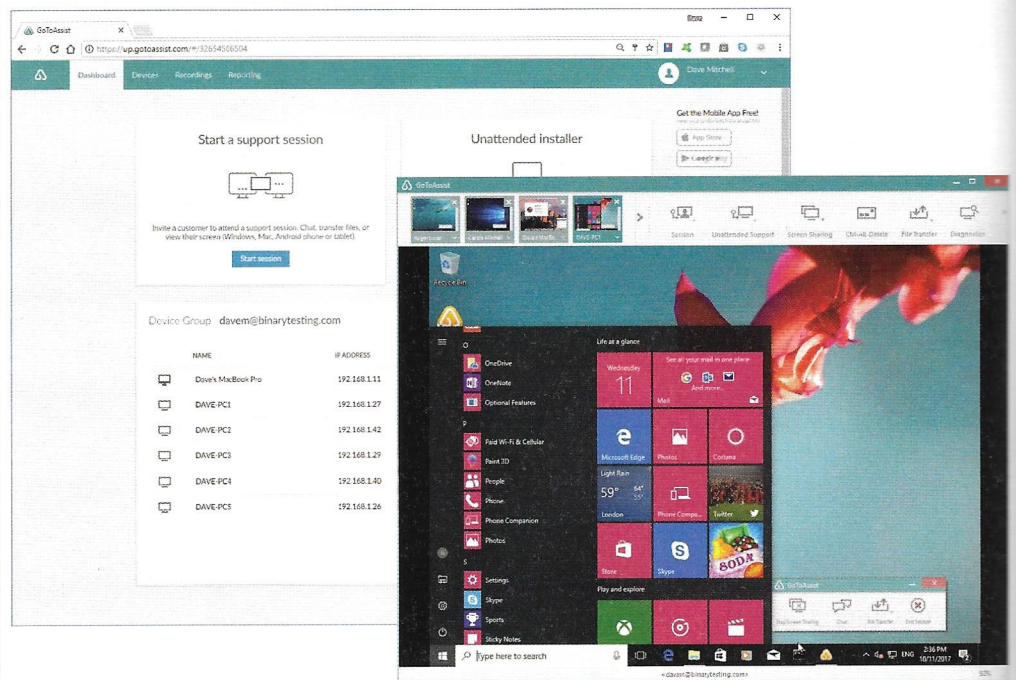
SCORE ★★★★☆

PRICE Yearly plan, per technician/month, £32 exc VAT from gotoassist.com

I f you're looking for cloud-based remote support with minimal training requirements, it doesn't get much easier than LogMeIn's GoToAssist. Its simple cloud portal lets technicians fire up both on-demand and unattended support sessions in a jiffy.

The cost is easy to manage too: GoToAssist's subscriptions allow you to pay for it on a rolling monthly basis, or save a bit of cash by signing up for a year or more. Even better, pricing is based on the number of technicians, with no limits on supported clients.

Along with remote-control services for Windows, Mac and Android devices, GoToAssist offers chat facilities, file transfer, clipboard sharing, basic diagnostics, session recording and collaborative sessions. As usual, you can't connect to iOS devices, but you do get technician apps for mobiles, allowing your staff to provide remote support on the go.

Central to GoToAssist operations is the **fastsupport.com** website, where clients go to join a support session. When a technician starts a session in the portal, a unique nine-digit access code is created; this can then be emailed to a client who can start the session by entering the code at the website, or simply clicking on the provided link.

Once the connection is made, the Customer app keeps everything nice and clear: a small window pops up on the user's desktop with four buttons enabling the user to stop screen sharing, start a chat, transfer files or end the session.

One clever feature of this app is that it runs as a service. This means you don't lose contact with the client if you need to reboot the remote system; the app automatically reloads on startup and the session resumes. Only once the customer clicks to end the session does the app unload itself.

The technician's window meanwhile presents a row of useful buttons across the top for accessing the various support tools. One feature we really like is the ability to have multiple sessions open, with multiple clients, in one interface. Just launch a new session from the same window

ABOVE The web portal is easy to use and conveniently supports multiple sessions

PC PRO RECOMMENDED

> "You don't lose contact with the client if you need to reboot the remote system; the app reloads and the session resumes"

and, when the client joins, an extra icon appears at the top left enabling you to swap back and forth between the two desktops

To enable unattended access, you simply need to install a small agent on each system; after this the system will appear in the main portal view for quick connection. Access security is handled by the Admin Center portal, which also provides direct access to any other LogMeIn apps you've purchased. For GoToAssist, you can create new technicians, set access permissions for file transfer and remote control, enable session recording and view activity reports.

LogMeIn GoToAssist doesn't support Linux, but we had no problem establishing both on-demand and unattended connections to macOS clients: the agent came in a DMG package which installed quickly and easily.

We also tested the iOS technician app on our iPad. After we'd logged into our account, this allowed us to start on-demand sessions using a PIN, and access all unattended system assigned to our account. Pleasingly, the iOS technician app provides the same toolset as the Windows version and even supports collaborative sessions. You can join existing sessions with other technicians and invite others to join your sessions.

GoToAssist is ideal for SMBs that want an easily deployed cloud-hosted support solution – as long as you don't need to connect to Linux systems. It's very affordable, and the ability to run multiple support sessions in the same technician window is a stand-out feature for larger organisations.
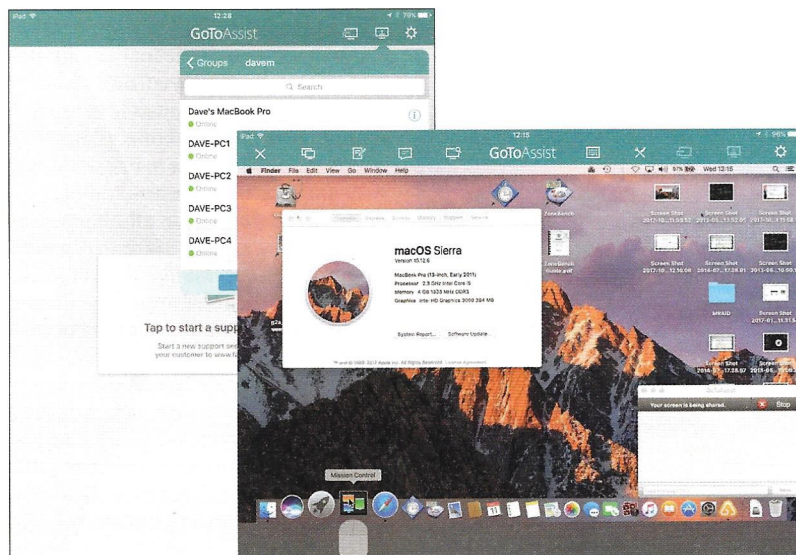
LEFT We used the free iOS technician app to remotely control our macOS clients

NetOp Remote Control 12.65

NetOp delivers joined-up hosted and on-premises remote support, offering great security and value
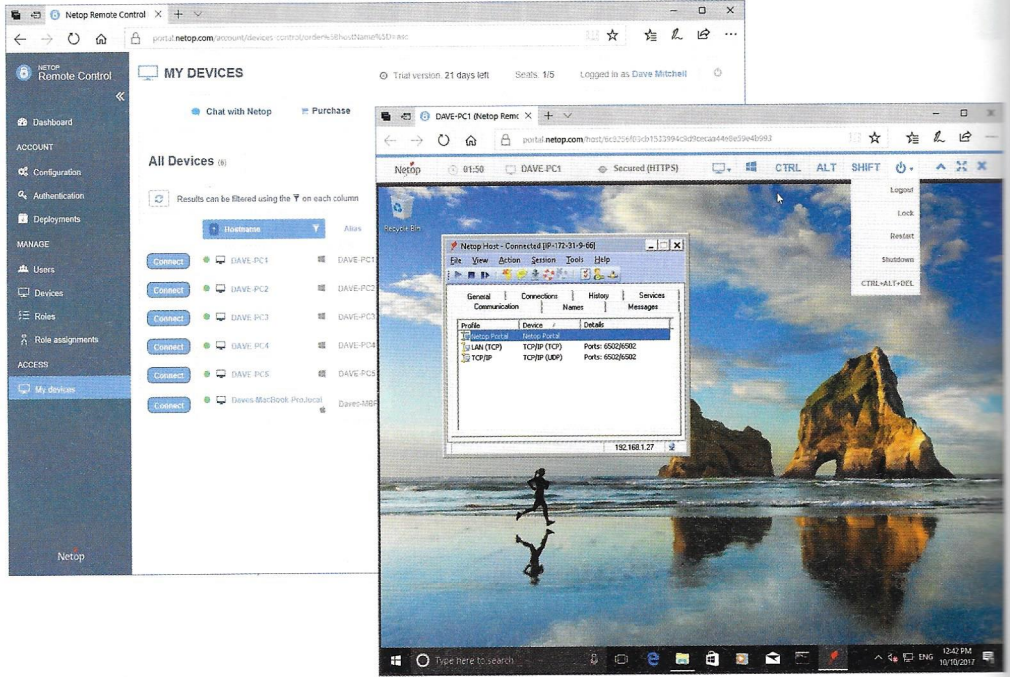
SCORE ★★★★★

PRICE 1 guest/10 hosts, £625 exc VAT
from netop.com

Now in its fourth decade, NetOp Remote Control has always boasted a sharp focus on access security. This latest version features optional multi-factor authentication, which requires technicians to enter their username and password plus a security code to access its web portal.

That's not to say that NetOp is cumbersome, though. Indeed, getting set up could hardly be simpler. as the Windows installer generates custom enrolment packages with unique signatures. This means there's no need to set up passwords individually; the deployment package links each desktop to the web portal account.

We were impressed by how well this works. After creating our enrolment package, we downloaded it to our Windows 10 desktops, after which it took less than a minute to install on each one. No further user intervention was required: once the installation process had completed, the hosts automatically popped up in our web portal ready for action.

Sadly, things are a bit less breezy for Mac users, who have to download and run a standalone installer from the NetOp support site. We also had to manually configure our NetOp account details before our macOS systems appeared in the portal.

Once your hosts are all registered, you can organise them into groups, if required, and create bespoke support profiles (which may optionally have limited lifespans and connection counts). The portal is also where you create user accounts for technicians and decide what functions they can access. This is another area where NetOp scores highly for security: it's easy to determine which technicians have full access to host systems, who gets view-only access, and set all sorts of granular options in between.

The portal also lets you open a browser-based HTTPS connection to any host via a single click. This provides basic remote-viewing and remote-control facilities, plus options to lock, restart or shut down the host – which might well be all you need. For greater control, you can install the more advanced NetOp Guest console, recently updated to support Windows Server 2016. We found this hooked up seamlessly to our NetOp Portal

ABOVE NetOp's portal provides a generous helping of remote access tools

PC PRO RECOMMENDED

"The installer generates enrolment packages with unique signatures, so there's no need to set up passwords individually"

account and all registered hosts were immediately displayed in its Quick Connect window.

From here, host connection is a simple double-click manoeuvre; the remote-control window offers a toolbar ribbon for quick access to all functions along with facilities to use the clipboard and reboot the host system. From the guest console, you can also use the host's dropdown menu for direct access to tools such as remote control, file transfer and chat.

It's supported by a remote-management tool, which presents handy views of the host's hard disks and provides access to the Windows Event Viewer and Task Manager. You can inspect running services, and stop or restart them, and even log the user out, restart the host – or turn it off.

There are two other tools that we found particularly useful too. Demonstrate mode allowed us to display the guest's screen on the host, so we could show users how to complete a particular task. Host sessions can also be recorded by the guest console and saved for posterity.

Finally, the guest console also includes a useful remote-inventory feature. Selected from the host's dropdown menu, this reads in plenty of useful details about hardware and software and stores them on the guest for later reference.

The neat combination of on-premises console and cloud portal makes NetOp Remote Control a great hybrid support solution. It offers a wealth of powerful support tools at a good price, with impressively tight and configurable access controls.
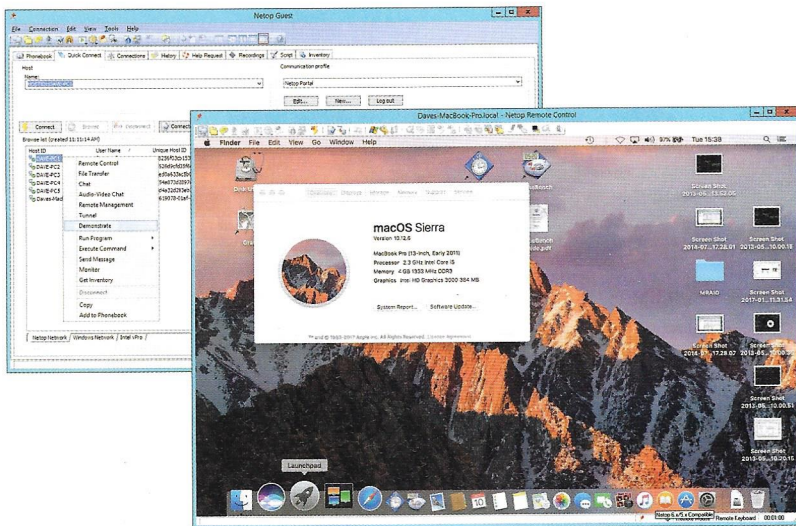
LEFT The console provides on-premises access to clients – including Mac users

NetSupport Manager 12.5

This on-premises support solution is big on features – and the management console is a joy to use
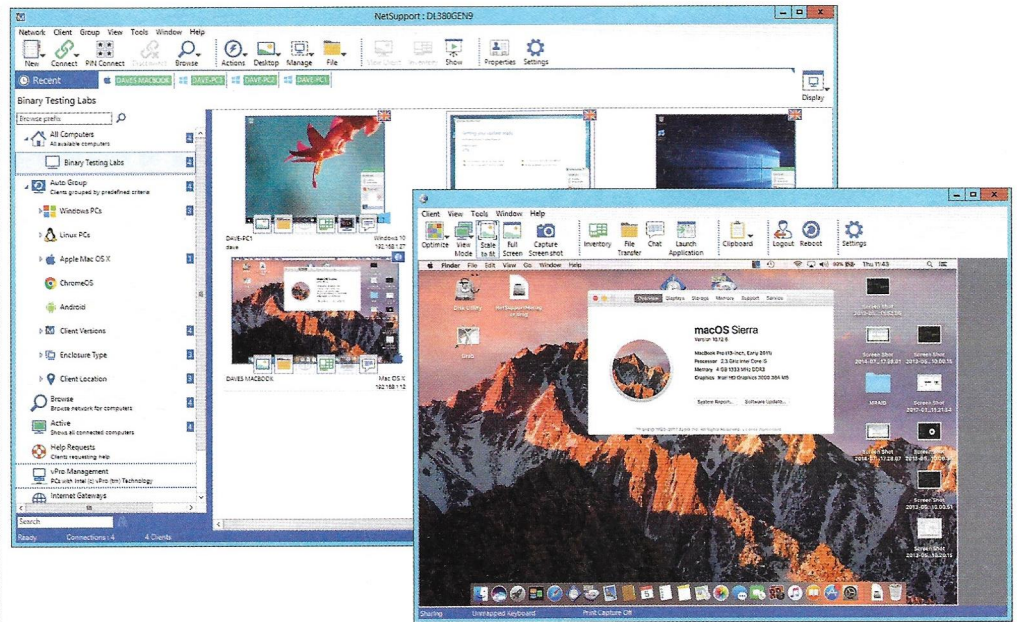
SCORE ★★★★★

PRICE 1 to 500 systems, £10 each exc VAT from netsupportmanager.com

ABOVE NSM's Auto Group feature keeps your clients organised

RECOMMENDED

"A handy thumbnail view lets you keep an eye on the desktops of connected systems in real-time"

S MBs seeking a flexible support solution need look no further than NetSupport Manager (NSM). It delivers a wealth of features, yet its management console is one of the most intuitive on the market – and after more than two decades of development, this latest version adds some great new features into the mix.

One notable upgrade is a new client for Android, which joins Windows, macOS, Linux and Chrome OS on the list of supported platforms. It provides full remote control features, plus chat, file transfer and views of network and battery status.

Windows clients meanwhile gain the useful ability to launch Windows PowerShell sessions directly from the console. File-transfer speeds over Gigabit Ethernet connections have been improved, and the inventory now provides real-time memory usage for Windows processes.

Despite NSM's advanced feature set, installation is simple. The Deploy tool runs discoveries on Active Directory (AD) domains or IP address ranges and can now list all systems local to the NSM Control host. We were able to select all our Windows 10 desktops from the Deploy interface and saw the client package pushed out to each one in around 30 seconds.

Sadly, macOS clients don't have it quite so easy: the Deploy tool doesn't work here, so you have to download the installer to each desktop and run it manually. This isn't hard, but it's time-consuming if you have a lot of clients to support.

From the NSM Control console, you can see all registered systems, set up custom groups and find endpoints by IP address or machine name. A handy thumbnail view lets you keep an eye on the desktops of connected systems in real-time, and a quick-launch icon below each one can be used to quickly fire up remote control, file transfer, command prompt or inventory.

One neat feature is the Auto Group tool, which organises your clients based on their OS, hardware type and NSM client versions. There's also a geolocation feature that groups systems based on their physical location – but this isn't always accurate, and our desktops showed up at the termination point of their internet connection, about 20 miles from our lab.

At the top of the Control console, a ribbon menu lets you launch apps on clients, capture their screen, open text or audio chats, share clipboards and run PowerShell sessions. For file transfers, a new window opens allowing you to drag and drop files between local and remote systems. NSM can also serve double duty as a training tool, as you can show your Control screen to multiple clients, make recordings, save them locally and replay them to selected clients.

Although you can't initiate a remote-access session over the web, NSM's Gateway component is easy to use, and enforces 256-bit AES encrypted connections between sites. The PIN Connect server is also ideal for large networks, requiring the technician and user to enter the same unique PIN to create an instant connection.

For tighter security you can also password-protect clients, apply Active Directory policies, decide what tools each technician can access and use smart cards. As a bonus, you can generate a client inventory that includes lists of hot fixes, processes and services where the latter can be remotely stopped, started or paused.

Finally, for support on the go there's also a handy iOS app. From here you can view all clients, initiate remote control sessions, chat, check their inventory, pull up a virtual keyboard and reboot them.

Despite its high-end features and security, NSM is affordably priced, with 1-500 endpoints costing £10 each for a perpetual licence. It provides everything on your IT department's wish list and more, making it a great remote-support solution for organisations of any size.
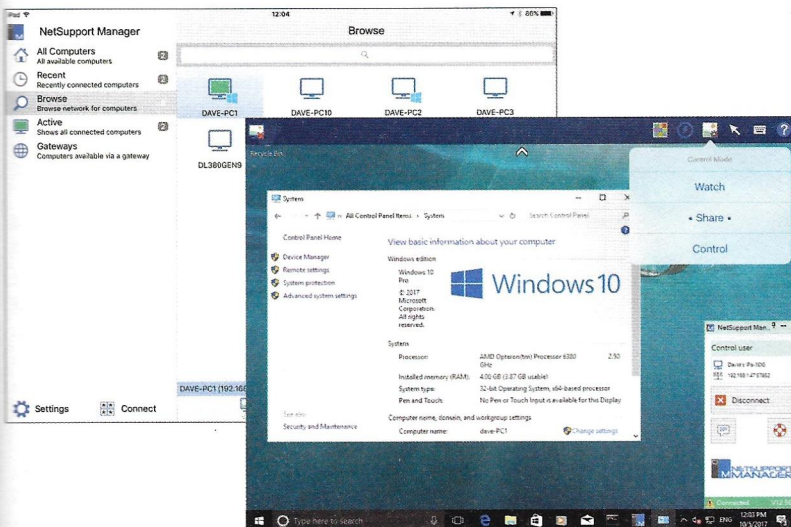
LEFT The free iOS app lets you remotely control Windows clients from an iPad

SolarWinds DameWare Remote Support 12.0.5

A distinctive tool that excels at agentless support, with Active Directory integration a particular plus point
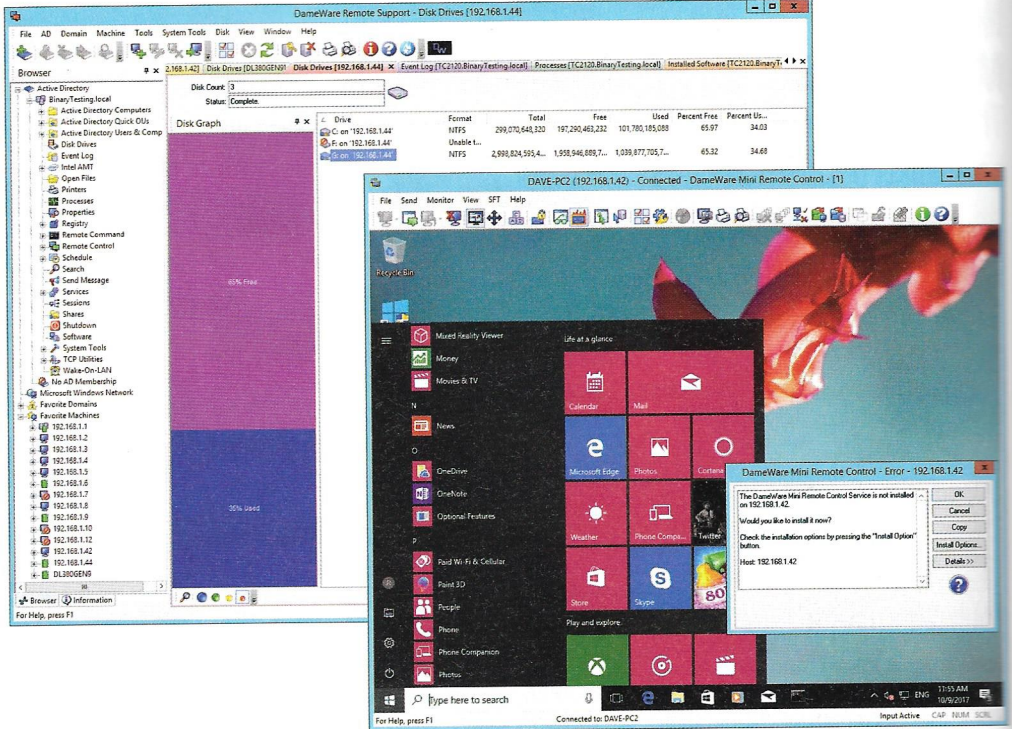
SCORE ★★★★☆

PRICE From £275 exc VAT for 1 technician
from solarwinds.com

ABOVE DameWare provides many services without needing an agent

DameWare is an unusual support solution: it can do a great deal without requiring agent software to be installed on client systems. That means it can provide all sorts of remote services right out of the box with almost no configuration.

It's offered in two forms: the standalone version is aimed at smaller businesses whose client systems mostly reside on the company LAN. Support tasks are generally handled from the Mini Remote Control (MRC) tool, which is launched directly from the DameWare console.

The Central Server version, meanwhile, is designed for larger organisations seeking to extend support services beyond their firewall. The package includes Proxy Server and Mobile Gateway Server components, to provide secure remote access to clients from iOS and Android mobile devices.

We tested the standalone version and found it very easy to deploy: we had it installed on a Windows Server 2012 R2 host in less than a minute. The console presents a simple Windows Explorer-style interface showing a list of all systems discovered on the local network. Even without loading agent software onto these clients, there's a remarkable range of remote support functions that can be conducted: you can view running processes, monitor hard disks and storage properties, check the event log and much more.

We were even able to open a remote command prompt window – and if the Windows Remote Support service isn't running on the target system, DameWare will offer to start it. Similarly, if you need to tweak the Registry, DameWare can start the Windows Remote Registry service to make this possible.

One area where DameWare doesn't impress so much is hardware inventory: you can only audit basic information such as its CPU, memory and graphics chip. Thankfully, the software inventory is more detailed: this is rescanned each time you request it, but you can export its findings as a CSV file.

Another minor niggle is that a quick-access tab opens at the top of the main window every time you select a tool. Tabs don't automatically close when you switch tools, so it's easy to end up with a confusing array of dozens of tabs.

Basic remote control sessions can be run over Windows' built-in RDP system within the DameWare console; the MRC tool provides a separate user interface with an extensive set of buttons for functions such as chat, view-only mode and remote reboot. It simplifies file-transfer operations too, with menu options for copying files between guest and host.

"If the Windows Remote Support service isn't running on the target system, DameWare will offer to start it"

DameWare is particularly good for Active Directory (AD) environments: the console provides direct access to containers, groups and users. When pointed at our Windows AD controller, it helpfully enumerated all objects and let us manage AD users or groups, unlock accounts and reset passwords.

Mac features are more limited, but we had no problems using MRC to connect to our macOS clients using the standard VNC service: all we needed do was enable screen sharing in the macOS System Preferences and protect access with a password.

In all, DameWare is a great choice for growing businesses. Its per-technician licensing is very affordable, and its agentless design means many support tasks can be accomplished without the need for a hands-on remote control session. ●
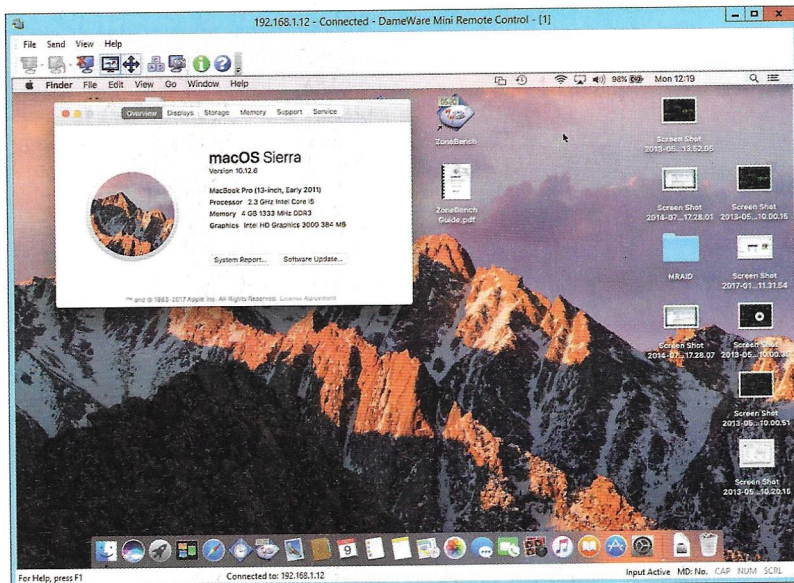
LEFT After enabling the local VNC service, we could remotely control our MacBooks