



Helping Avoid Desktop Gridlock

BY DON RIMA

Gridlock. This word can bring pain to those who live in the urban world. The Washington Post even has a columnist that calls himself “Dr. Gridlock.” He dispenses his advice like candy from a Pez dispenser. Frankly, every time I’m stuck in D.C. metro traffic, I often wonder just where he got his degree.

But if you’re dealing in a multiple-system environment, there’s another area that can see a lot of high-density traffic—your desktop. Not the screen on your PC, but literally, the top of your desk. For many folks running a multiple-CPU or LPAR environment, maintaining a separate monitor for a console device can be a concern. And for others, going to the machine room for console functions can be an annoyance, especially when the machine is in the basement and your office is on the 14th floor.

What if you could bring consolidated-console functionality into your office and have all of it on one screen at once. Well, for those who need or can use this type of option, I’m reviewing just such a product this month—the Multiple System Console Solution from Twin Data Corp. (www.twindata.com).

Installation

The product is basically a little black box that attaches to your twinax workstation port and plugs into your network. It has a pigtail so you can daisy-chain it as part of a wiring schema with a regular monitor that you, for example, keep in the machine room for local

Spotlight Profile

Product: *Multiple System Console Solution*

Company: *Twin Data Corp.*

Version: *1.27*

URL: *www.twindata.com*

Overall Rating: *3.871*

dedicated functions (e.g., backups) and don’t want to run over a network. As far as your system, it’s just another attached device, be it a printer or workstation. Actually, it can be all of the devices on that port or just as few as you need. Plan on using a static IP versus letting DHCP assign it an IP on the fly. Frankly, it’s one of the easiest installs I’ve done in a long time.

If you consider this product, even if testing it, I recommend that you keep a monitor attached to your system, preferably one with multiple terminal emulations (i.e., the ability to have more than one session device assigned and active to it). That’s because the system is smart enough to know you’re upstairs using the console, or whatever device, and will know if there’s a device already occupying an address. So, if you go to the machine room and leave your session active, your downstairs device in conflict is dead until you end the job or unplug it from the network.

If you’re used to a regular terminal keyboard layout, expect to change the keyboard-template option on each session you configure. There’s no global default-

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The Rima Report

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq

Category	Points	Weighting	Overall Score
Certifiability	4.00	.100	0.400
Installation	3.90	.150	0.585
Ease of Use	3.90	.150	0.585
Documentation	3.80	.150	0.570
Functionality	3.85	.150	0.576
Usefulness	3.80	.150	0.570
Support	3.90	.150	0.585
Total	31.05		3.871



KICK THE TIRES: If you need this functionality, this is where you start looking for a solution.

(Points given are on a scale of 0 to 4, with 4 being the highest. Each category is assigned its own weighting from the total of 100 percent.)

ILLUSTRATION BY RICHARD CLARK

setting options to tailor the defaults to your liking, so you must make some changes to the device setting from hard-coded defaults. I hope this changes soon. An optional 122-key, 24-command key keyboard for your PC is available as well, giving you the same layout and feel as a standard twinax console.

Ease of Use

Frankly, this is one of the easiest terminal-emulation products I've used since I worked with an old 5250 dialup-emulation package back in PC-DOS days. The most difficult aspect of using it will probably be getting your network administrators to give you static IP addresses. The rest is just following the bouncing ball and getting to work.

Documentation

I found a few minor issues where the documentation hadn't kept up with the current release of the software, but they're fairly minor and by the time you read this should be fixed. Other than that, the Multiple System Console Solution was simple and easy to use.

Certifiability

Overall everything I looked at worked as advertised.

Functionality/Usefulness

This product does a nice job of giving you remote-console capability. But don't think it's going to totally replace your need for a local device plugged into port 0 and address 0. There are some things that you just don't want to do over a network, necessarily. Avoid any actions that would result in an abend or give unpredictable results if the terminal were to be turned off during the process. But then, if you've got a stable network and accept the risk levels, you can switch to dedicated mode from your office, home or laptop.

If you remember using the old Micro Integration 5250 remote notebook package to dial into your ECS modem, this is the next best thing for today. It doesn't have dialup, but you can hit it from wherever you give it access.

The current release doesn't support secure point-to-point functionality, which is slated for availability in the first quarter of 2006. But if you have a VPN connection, you're covered. What I'm looking for is the security behind what you see when you browse to a page via HTTPS vs. HTTP.

This product could also be used for normal, non-console functions. If you have a bank of programmers that you want to be hammering away in 5250 mode on legacy software, this could do the trick, but in this case, you probably already have

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Client Access installed.

Unlike some emulation-software packages that require the client and the server versions to be in sync and can incur some expensive costs, from what I can see here, the portal device and software is release independent, which means you can use the same client software to hit the servers, regardless of which i5/OS* or OS/400* release the servers are running.

A few quirks with screen minimization may leave you hunting for a screen you can't find or that just doesn't appear to be there. This was a new item for tech support to resolve, but if you have the issue, they now know how to help you locate the screens (they don't go away). An upgrade recommendation is in the works to make this a permanent fix.

And for those of you using Linux* clients, this product doesn't run on Linux. It would be nice if it did.

Support

Twin Data's support is really top drawer. A defective unit was replaced overnight and they dug into problems really well.

What I'd Like to See in the Next Release

- Linux client support
- HTTPS support
- Default install options for all devices

Summary

If you get the idea that I like Multiple System Console Solution, you're right. I wouldn't use it for everything, but for a light-footprint emulation package that provides both display station and printer support, it's nice. Also, if you must bring the console with you to remote locations, it seems to work just fine. 

Don Rima has more than 20 years of experience with IBM* midrange systems. For the past 10 years, he has owned a consulting group. Don can be reached at dr2@cssas400.com.