

How to pick the right network support tool?

Full Control
Networks
Whitepaper

There are a lot of network, LAN, WAN, wireless and cabling support tools on the market. They all want your money and may claim to do everything you need. So how do you pick your way through to find the right one for you?

Here's our guide.

What problem is causing you the biggest headache?

If you are going to get budget for a tool quickly, you need a tight set of requirements where the issues you are trying to solve are causing enough pain to justify the cost.

Beware of the following:

- Adding more and more requirements to the list to try to get the sign off over the line

This is a popular strategy as people (with the best of intentions) try to stretch the requirements lists more and more to make it look like the purchase is going to solve everything. It just won't. Draw a line and say this box is for this set of jobs. If you have an increasing list then maybe you actually need more than one solution? Or perhaps the rest of the requirements aren't worth any extra spend otherwise they would be nearer the top of the list?

- Management high-jacking engineering requirements (and vice versa)

As a basic rule, engineers do installs and solve problems therefore need specific tools that are fast with the right level of detail. Managers need trending and capacity information, when is a link worth upgrading, how many people are using something etc. These two functions are not the same and are often not solved with the same tool set.

- Being afraid of getting more than one tool

Experience has shown that people with two or three tools are happy that each tool has its own purpose and they know when to use each one. Big solutions that promise to do everything often end up being white elephants in the corner of the room or hiding under the desk. They may be capable solutions but no one has the time to sit there and work it all out. Speed and convenience will always win!

- If you do want a big management solution who's going to use it?

There are some very good network management solutions out there, but they take time and knowledge to use. Basically, they become someone's job. If you have the

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resource for this, then great, a world of interesting stuff is heading your way. The more common situation is no-one has time for more than a 10 minute look a couple of times a week.

- Beware staring at your management tool and saying everything is OK when people are complaining

Every tool, every piece of software has its limits and the biggest frustration in the world is seeing a screen of green icons whilst the phone is ringing non-stop. Clearly the things being measured are fine, but it's not measuring the right things, probably because that tool can't!

So where does this leave us? Here at Full Control Networks reviewing and using tools for network testing, troubleshooting and monitoring is what we do, and working out their best role is part of the information we pass on to our customers. Below are some starting points:

Engineers tools

- ❖ Copper and Fibre Cable Testing and Troubleshooting : For installation engineers and/or support teams with lots of legacy cabling to look after – See [Fluke Networks](#)
- ❖ Handheld Network Troubleshooting Tools : For network support staff and engineers who have to set things up, change configs, look into connection issues – See [NetAlly](#)
- ❖ Wireless survey & troubleshooting : For installation and support staff to check coverage, design new installs and problem solve – See [AirMagnet](#), [AirCheck](#) and [EtherScope](#)
- ❖ Packet Capture tools : These contain huge amounts of information to solve the tricky issues but only see little parts of the network at a time. These tools are useful for leaving on site to monitor baselines or catch intermittent problems as they can record information over a few days/weeks to catch these troublesome events – See [Allegro Packets](#)

Management Tools

- ❖ SNMP monitoring tools : To monitor basic stats over time using the network hardware to provide the information. Although these are often seen as support tools, they can lack detail and don't actually see the real traffic at all. Perfect for looking at behaviour over time and displaying overview maps of the network in green/red which are popular – See [Solarwinds](#)

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- ❖ NetFlow Tools – Again they don't see the packets directly but pull data from your Layer 3 devices to see what's going on. Very good for diagnosing capacity issues in a LAN/WAN network and providing stats by IP addresses and protocols – [See Scrutinizer by Plixer](#)
- ❖ Hosted Application monitoring – Specifically designed to monitor the path through a network, between sites or from users to their hosted services. Its main purpose is to show the source of any delays, which element and location, so great for confirming whose problem it really is, which has value in today's hosted world – See [AppNeta](#)
- ❖ Application Performance Monitoring (APM) – this is all about monitoring how services are being delivered to the users, usually against some sort of SLA target if things are slow, who do you blame, Servers, Application or Network? – See [Apex by Viavi](#)

Summary

There are clearly more than just these tools out there, but the basic rules are the same, give engineers what they need to do that job. Management solutions have a different role and tend to provide information over a longer period of time. Often management tools tend to have the good reporting options which is a very useful asset when managing the costs of a network over weeks and months, but less use when trying to stop the help desk phone ringing now.

However, as a wise man probably never said, “producing a pretty graph that's all green when the network is crashing around you is never a good thing ...”

Right tool for the right job!