Netwinder OfficeServer

BLACK
OFFICE

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Can Netwinder's unassuming "black box" server really supply an all in one office solution?

Normally I'm not a fan of "all-in-one" office solutions, but when I was sent Rebel.Com's Netwinder OfficeServer product to review I was pleasantly surprised. It's one of the "black box" servers on the market at the moment which provide utilities such as print spooling, file server, directory services, an Intranet/Extranet server, an administration utility, backup services, and lots more.

Externally it's small, discreet and unassuming – a beige box, which can stand either flat, or upright (it comes with its own stand if you prefer the latter): the front contains a power LED and hard disk LED. There are a plethora of ports on the rear of the unit, two for ethernet, a serial port through which a modem can be used, a parallel port, an SVGA port for a monitor and keyboard if you need it, and rather surprisingly a mouse port. It's also rather quiet.

On the right-hand side there's a reset button – this seems to be placed rather carelessly, as the manual encourages the user to place the unit on the side leading to the possibility of accidental reset. A slider switch controls the volume of the speaker.

Together with the unit itself, the package also comes with both a rather thick spiral-bound paper manual for administrators and a thinner edition for end-users. Finally there's a quick-start CD-ROM containing RPM editions of packages for the OfficeServer, browseable versions of the manuals, and other utilities designed to recover the unit in the event of a crash. The sheer documentation itself will be a comfort to users who are new to the Linux operating system.

When you first power-up the OfficeServer, you might be forgiven for thinking you've bought a Mac: a brief tune sounds, followed by a sampled voice saying "Welcome to Netwinder!" when it's finished booting up and is ready for use. Total time

to start up can take between 3 and 8 minutes, depending on whether or not it's carrying out disk maintenance.

From the first, power-up configuration takes place through a web browser-based interface. There are two sides to this: the usual "System Administration" side, but also a less common "User Services" side. Both sides of the interface are accessible remotely, and I can imagine that this aspect of the Netwinder software is very useful in circumstances such as unexpected staff absence!

The bundled user services aim to take oft-requested user actions from the system administrator and give the responsibility to the user: for instance, the email section allows creation of response text for receipt acknowledgements and "away message" text, without even entering a command-line.

I was particularly impressed with the website creation tool giving a "wizard" approach. This useful little utility allows a user to create their own website in little under 5 minutes, although a method of uploading websites to an ISP's own server would have been useful. There are facilities to add in graphics and of course edit the pages directly, if you so wish.

There's a discussion list system whereby a user may join public or private lists, and a flexible document management system. Of course, the ubiquitous filestore is present and accessible from both Apple and Windows machines, enabling users to share their files in both public and private areas.

On a final note regarding the user-side system: a backup facility is provided for users to take responsibility for saving their own user-space on the unit to a local machine. This, I imagine, will be a powerful tool in heightening user confidence in the device.

The administration system consists of the usual facilities associated with such a product: creation and deletion of users, websites, host entries, services, etc. It provides an extensive suite of facilities for such management, including a

firewalling and port forwarding feature that isn't normally associated with units such as the OfficeServer. It's simple approach to this and the associated network address translation will make it a hit with people who are more familiar with a graphical environment for configuration.

In addition to the obvious web server capability, a wide variety of access protocols are supported, including POP3/IMAP/SMTP (for mail), DHCP, a static DNS server, both Windows and Apple file sharing, print serving, and a web proxy service. A notable absence from the administration service is an SNMP capability, although for the target market this will probably not matter much.

Working for an ISP, the questions asked most frequently regard security: both Virtual Private Networking and Secure Shell tools (as opposed to Telnet) are missing from the implementation. It would be good for Rebel to consider this as an addition to the unit's repertoire to satisfy the security-conscious! A VPN capability is mentioned on the back cover of the Administrator's Manual, but I couldn't find any reference to it inside – is this possibly a future expansion?

So how do we get connectivity to the 'Net? If you're using ADSL or a leased line, simply plug an ethernet cable into one of the available ports. If you're using a modem it's quite simple – hook up a modem to the serial port, configure PPP under the control panel, and you're away. There's even an option for dial-on-demand or to bring the connection up between specific hours. Sadly though there isn't yet an option to limit the time spent online.

Under the hood, it's powered by a StrongArm SA110 processor, with up to 128Mb RAM and a 2.5" IDE hard drive. This should be powerful enough for most applications of this unit, but the processor will more than likely cause compilation problems for many users trying to upgrade applications without Rebel.Com's own blessing. The ECP/EPP parallel port on the rear supports installation of a parallel-port ZIP drive, or a CD drive, so this may be a good route to go for backups of the unit.

A rather serious omission is that of access to log data. There seem to be little or no logs available to view via the OfficeServer's front-end, which will leave novice sysadmins floundering when attempting to troubleshoot problems. This is the one major point which lets the OfficeServer down, although the standard syslog is running and accessible through the command-line interface and of course you can connect an SVGA monitor to view console messages.
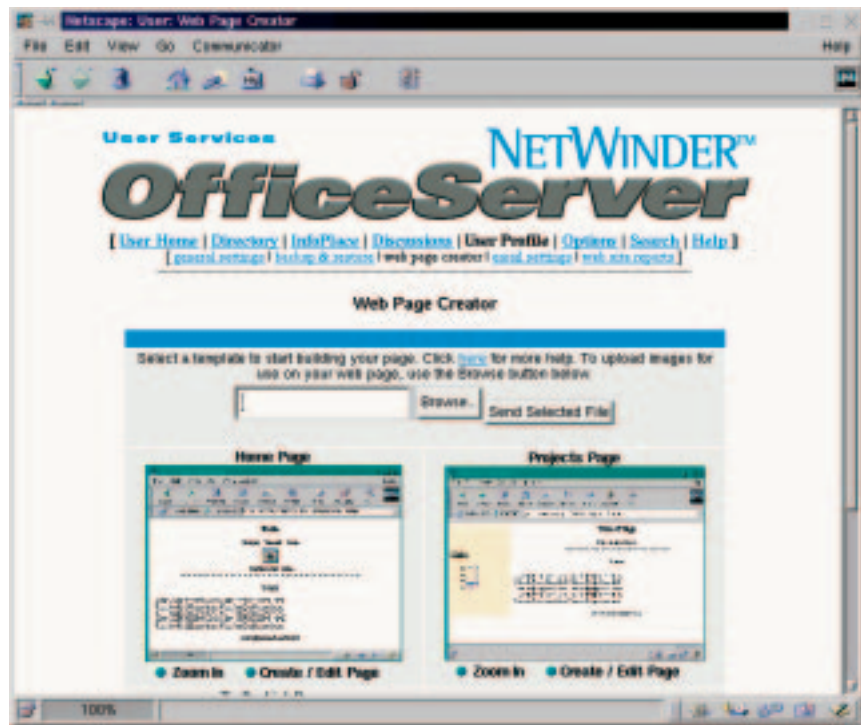
I must admit that after trying to remotely administer the Netwinder from a distance, the large amount of graphics present on the front-end causes a substantial speed decrease on modems and slower leased lines. Indeed, due to the design it is almost impossible to view with older browsers. This makes carrying out administration tasks on your cellmodem a no no! The interface is very user-friendly though, and Rebel.Com provides a road-test environment on their website so you can play with it before you make a purchase.

In conclusion, although very useful for the small one-geek office it's more likely to frustrate the more competent technophile who will want to get inside and recompile software. It's absolutely ideal however for a company which is looking to deploy a firewall, gateway and Intranet solution and doesn't know where to start nor have the inclination to try. As far as office-in-a-box products go, the sheer ease-of-use will make this worthwhile in saved time alone: logging capability aside, this is one of the better units for which Rebel should be justly proud.■

The Netwinder OfficeServer is available in two versions: Desktop or rackmounted.