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Network Cable Management

Real-Time Tools Take The Cable Management Monsters Of The Wiring Closet

The computer cabling that links your computers together and connects them to the Internet forms a hidden asset that is becoming increasingly important in these days of e-commerce. What is out of sight is often quickly forgotten and undocumented, causing unnecessary repair delays or even wasted dollars on unnecessary computer wiring expansion.

With more business tasks becoming automated, the loss of even a few minutes of connection time could mean the financial loss of business transactions measuring tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars. This becomes even more critical when a fledgling network technician is taught that a majority of network failures occur at the physical layer of cables, networking equipment, patch panels, and even wall jacks.

Until recently, knowing which wire went where took lots of record keeping and tedious preparing wiring diagrams. Even if a wiring plant was fully documented once, the pace of computer support may devalue this important knowledge. IT managers are often put off such record keeping for years, waiting for a "quiet day" that never comes. It would be nice if the wiring could "map" itself.

ICMSes (intelligent cable management systems) do just that. ICMS vendors claim their equipment can help technicians quickly locate physical layer faults, install new equipment, and accurately plan for business expansion. ICMS systems can work on both computer network and PBX systems. According to the vendors, ICMS can help identify unused computer wall jacks and switch ports, saving money by making use of forgotten resources. In the important areas of security and disaster recovery, critical computer resources can be monitored for outages or unauthorized equipment additions.

With software to interpret and display the results and sensors attached to wiring patch panels, ICMS products can tell you which wire goes where and that wire's location. They can be used to trace out wiring through patch points, network switches, patch panels, and even wall jacks. If you're hoping that placing a single sensor in the wiring closet can make sense of the mess, you're going to be disappointed. However, if you apply ICMS components throughout the wiring plant, you can make sense of all that wire and take action.

■ Make Use Of ICMS

ICMS lets managers make up-front investments in managing cable plants. Rega size, companies that depend upon the network to help them market their produc to manage all of their assets efficiently and speedily. With orders arriving from th Internet, cable outages and bottlenecks mean lost dollars. It really boils down to downtime and lost revenue. Regardless of your company's size, can you afford a outage that can last hours while someone troubleshoots the problem with out-of-information? If you need it fixed *now*, you should look into ICMS.

Smaller business can adopt ICMS more quickly than larger companies because companies should have fewer connections to manage. Taken with good planning could make a smaller technology-heavy company more responsive to its custom more agile in growth, and more resistant to disaster.

Smaller companies also do not have the luxury of a large IT staff who can devote time to cable plant management. In many cases, there may be only one network administrator, and that may be a part-time assignment. ICMSes help technicians fewer errors when making network changes and give them good tools to monitor performance. These tools can also tie into NMS (network management system) consoles, such as HP OpenView or Computer Associates Unicenter, which may be in use at the company operations center.

■ ICMS Products

Two popular ICMS products include Avaya's SYSTIMAX iPatch System and iTRACS' iTRACS (Intelligent Tracking Asset Control Solution). The SYSTIMAX iPatch System uses the iPatch System Manager software to perform cable management and for documenting chores, using industry standard patch cables instead of sensor-equipped ones.

Both the iPatch System and iTRACS make use of SNMP to alert NMS software of cabling status. Avaya's iPatch System Manager 3.0 software can communicate with such NMS products as HP's OpenView. The software also uses HTML to present supplemental data. iPatch System Manager users can decide which of the circuits should have alarms to prevent unnecessary alerts. Alarms can also be set as reminders of scheduled changes for specific circuits. Changes at the patch panel are reported to the NMS in real-time.

The iPatch System Manager software also lets the user see circuits visually orga a floor plan. Connectivity traces show the state of the network's physical layer in time, with historical data and future changes available as references. Remote us access iPatch data through a Web interface, letting IT managers check on a circ away from the iPatch System Manager console.

iPatch data is stored in SQL format, and Avaya recommends a Microsoft SQL se



***Avaya's iPatch System
an intelligent cable
management system
copper and fiber opti
cable media that allo
remote control anc
monitoring of patch p
connections.***

(SQL 7.0 or above) for larger enterprises. If Microsoft SQL server is not available setup program will install a copy of the Microsoft Data Engine.

The iTRACS approach makes use of software featuring a Sybase SQL database query software, a graphics package, a Web-based management module, and all tools. The software communicates with hardware-based analyzers, which evaluate iTRACS sensors found in patch cables and iTRACS-enabled network equipment as hubs and patch panels, from third-party manufactures.

Rick McNees, vice president of marketing for iTRACS, says, "iTRACS users enjoy reduced operating costs from improved productivity, increased service levels through reduced risk of operational disruptions, increased asset utilization, enhanced security and the users have a foundation for business continuity and disaster recovery."

iTRACS standard edition software provides basic tools for a small to medium-sized company. A thin client provides links from Microsoft Office applications to iTRACS



iTRACS intelligent cable management software offers network administrators a wide range of real-time management and documentation tools.

based remote management is supported, a Pocket PC module lets Pocket PCs access iTRACS data. iTRACS advanced edition software provides the same tools as the standard edition with SNMP support included. Support for AutoCAD drawings, with drag-and-drop data exchange between iTRACS to the drawing files, is also included. There are additional modules for a discovery tool and a wiring closet manager.

iTRACS 6.0 software takes its interface with other software one step farther, with tight integration with Computer Associates Unicenter. This ensures that data created in one application is also duplicated in the other. For instance, once you create a change order through Unicenter's Service Desk, the change order number can be generated in iTRACS by pressing the Create In iTRACS button in the Unicenter Service Desk.

■ Invest In Better Management

Intelligent cable management represents a significant investment, but proponents argue that it can recoup the investment in improved service response and security, with fewer human errors associated with moving, adding, or changing connections. With this in mind, the investment makes sense for organizations where outages mean big real losses.

Pricing for complete ICMS installations will vary according to the wiring plant and software extras. For planning purposes, installation of an ICMS might work out to be 25% of the total wiring plant infrastructure, McNees notes. ■

by Bill Hayes

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