

RichM on BCP and Free Apps Like Spiceworks

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Discuss in Forums {mos_smf_discuss:RichM}

RichM is a real person. Everything contained in this column is real. This evolving column will live and breath with RichM's daunting new job. Your feedback helps decide the direction the column will take. It may be a bumpy ride, but it will be educational. Let's call this experiment Reality Web 2.0.

This month, as I continue the daunting task of my new job, a couple thoughts are forefront in my mind:

- Over the years I have had good fortune to always be on the "ins" with the main decision maker (CEO, president, etc.). Sometimes it was because the company was so small that knowing the owner was inevitable. Other times it was because my immediate supervisor was the go to guy; which made me the go to go guy (in waiting) by proxy. Currently this is not the situation, and for the first time I am on the outside looking in. I don't want anyone to get the wrong impression. I do know the decision makers, and they know me, but getting face time is near impossible.

- Many of us know how hard it is for IT to get a workable budget. Then try to boil it down for information security, and the picture gets even more grim. Of course there are always exceptions to the rules, but overall most of us need all the free solutions we can get our hands on.

Laying the Groundwork for Business Continuity Planning (BCP)

Lack of access to decision makers is a major problem when discussing something as crucial as Business Continuity Planning/Disaster Recovery Planning (BCP/DRP). I have an outline and know what I want to say, but I do not want it presented in any other way than a formal meeting. That way I can read their level of commitment and proceed based on this gauged reaction. This may be hard for some of us to realize (I was a little awe struck myself at first), but, even after the terrorist attacks in New York, DC and PA, companies for the most part do not think about DRP/BCP until they need one.

Apparently, we as IT people are great in a crisis and should be able to get a fully functioning network up and running on a moment's notice. While I would like to say that I am usually up to any challenge; without a well planned, thought out BCP/DRP we don't stand a chance.

I find that, because I am on the outside looking in, I need to make allies; otherwise, the DRP/BCP will never get off the ground. I have begun getting to know the executive assistants and how to approach them. If you can win over the EA, then you have the keys to the kingdom. The EA always knows the mood of his or her supervisor and the best time to approach them. Sadly, we are nearing the end of the year and the last thing they want is a meeting regarding the demise of their company. Holiday downer I guess. The first quarter will be when I get the opportunity to plead my case (at the right time) and get the initialization phase underway. Wish me luck, I think I may need it.

Free Apps

I would like to start including (when possible) applications that can make our lives easier that don't require a purchase order. The following is an amazing tool which may be too invasive for some, but if you can overlook the data aggregation (see privacy policy highlights below), it could be an app you can't function without.

Spiceworks (www.spiceworks.com)

To the uninitiated, Spiceworks runs on your network and catalogs information regarding workstations, servers, printers, etc. In an easy to use GUI, Spiceworks detects installed software, patch levels, and any type of network anomalies that could cause issues. This application is 100% free and is available to anyone who wants it. If this sounds too good to be true, please read on. The following are the caveats of the privacy policy. Accept them or decide that they are too much to ask, that question is left to you.

Privacy Policy: <http://www.spiceworks.com/privacy/>

- All of this configuration information is stored locally in a file on your computer in an encoded format. Access to this file is password protected using the operating systems access control mechanisms. None of this configuration information is sent to, or stored at, Spiceworks. This file and its contents are not made accessible through the Spiceworks Desktop to Spiceworks.
- From time to time, the Spiceworks Desktop does collect a limited amount of anonymous aggregate information about your computing environment. This information is collected into groups so that it no longer reflects or references an individually identifiable user, device, or software application. No device-specific or software-specific information is stored at Spiceworks.
- Your copy of the Spiceworks Desktop includes a unique application number. When you install the Spiceworks Desktop, this number and a message indicating whether the installation succeeded or failed, is sent back to Spiceworks. Also, when the Spiceworks Desktop automatically checks to see if a new version is available, the current version number and the unique application number are sent to Spiceworks.
- We may share anonymous aggregated information with third parties outside of Spiceworks.
- We may use log file information, which does not identify individual users, to analyze trends, to administer the site, to track users' movements around the site, to gather demographic information about our user base as a whole, and to operate and improve the Spiceworks technologies and services.

After some soul searching, I felt that the data collected would not be detrimental to how we do business, so I went ahead and installed the application. Since all information is stored locally and is password protected, I am reasonably confident that Spiceworks is not a threat to my enterprise.

Pros vs. Cons

Pros:

- Very thorough. Once the scan was over, I could easily identify how many copies of a particular program were running and their associated versions.
- Spiceworks identified a number of machines that needed immediate attention.
- It also catalogues extremely useful information like MAC addresses, serial numbers and IP addresses.
- Spiceworks will work for both Windows and *nix (we do not have any macs, but I am sure since OS X and higher are FreeBSD that it will run on those as well).

Cons:

- Extremely slow.
- Processor intensive. It is highly recommended that you have a dedicated machine that will only run Spiceworks.
- There is a slight delay when you switch between tabs. This is not a deal breaker, but it can be frustrating.

Overall Impressions:

I am willing to live with the data it collects, since it is password protected and stored locally. Performance will always be slow the first time you run the scan. But provided Spiceworks is running on a stand alone machine with a descent processor and adequate ram (my machine was running Windows XP SP2 with 256 MB of RAM), you shouldn't find it's slowness an issue. Most importantly because of the wealth of information it provides, I am a big fan of this application.

As always, your feedback in the forums on either topic is highly encouraged.