

Systems security

Configuresoft Enterprise Configuration Manager

Version	4.5
Supplier	Configuresoft
Price	\$995 per server; \$30 per workstation
Contact	www.configuresoft.com

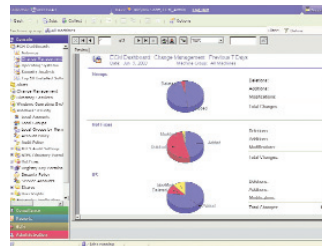
Managing a network has never been easy, whether it comprises 100 or 100,000 machines. Even with a dedicated network administrator, the overheads are horrendous. Rolling out new applications, checking for non-licensed software, looking at network traffic... full-time tasks that often have no one with a full-time job to attend to them. This becomes even more worrying when you consider the security implications.

To their credit, companies such as Microsoft and Cisco have become far more efficient and timely in reporting security loopholes in their software and in posting patches for download. But the problem comes in installing those patches. One company recently had a network administrator working full-time for months, just to install a single patch onto all of the machines on its network. Not only is this a waste of resources, but leaves the company vulnerable.

Although there are a number of remote management tools available, the majority of them lack the scalability necessary to manage the largest of install bases. What might initially appear to be a simple application can become complex and nigh-unmanageable when the number of machines in the network grows into the thousands or tens of thousands.

Configuresoft has come up with the answer with version 4.5 of its Enterprise Configuration Manager product. ECM is designed to both collect raw data from across the entire network, slice and dice it to exact reporting requirements, and detect and enforce machine configurations – including security patches – for every machine, however many there might be.

This application is a joy to install



– it can sit anywhere in the network. A lightweight agent is installed on each machine, but this remains inactive until required; data is stored centrally on a Microsoft SQL database, minimizing network traffic.

All management and administration is carried out through a browser-based interface which can be accessed from anywhere in the network. Initial configuration of the product takes a little time, but this is only to be expected when you are managing an entire network. Furthermore, it is infinitely more straightforward and pleasurable than some management tools on the market. You can also filter your network into user groups, network domains and machine groups, for example, making management even easier.

The interface is possibly one of the most usable we have ever seen in a product. Configuresoft went back to the drawing board with graphical designers and usability analysts, and the result is outstanding.

The product is split into four areas, represented as four colored bars in the navigation pane on the left of the main portal. The console allows you to see the raw data from your network. However, since ECM can collect over 40,000 configuration variables from every machine in the network, the other modules in the product are there to make sure you only see the information you need to see. The compliance module allows you both to see machines that do not comply to your company application policy, and to enforce and re-install approved configurations as and when necessary. This can even be carried

out automatically. You can also detect when individual changes were made, with a detailed audit trail to please even the most pernickety administrator.

Administration lets you break the network down into manageable areas, as well as setting authorities and rules for data capture and scheduling routine tasks. The reporting module offers you more template reports than you could ever need. In addition, the built-in Crystal Reports application allows you to create whatever report your organization requires.

Security is of key interest, and this is an area in which ECM particularly impresses. Access to the configuration of your entire network and the ability to enforce that will help close the majority of security loopholes, but ECM employs Security Update Manager (SUM) to ensure that even the most up-to-date security incidents can be addressed in a fraction of the time it would usually take. With direct access to Microsoft's Security Database, ECM can monitor your network for security vulnerabilities in real time, and download patches and install them as soon as they become available. To make matters even easier, these patches can be downloaded to a local machine and installed from there, reducing network traffic. Multiple patches can be installed at once, and reboots scheduled so that they only occur after the success of the patches is guaranteed.

Documentation is impressive. The user guide is a hefty tome supplied in PDF format, but it covers the entire product in a straightforward and extremely well written way. Configuresoft's support is just



as outstanding – upon purchase, one of the company's technical experts will run you through every aspect of the product, either in person or remotely over the internet.

ECM 4.5 is possibly the most advanced and powerful network management product currently available: easy to use, but giving you all the information that you could possibly need, and allowing the roll-out of application and security updates in hours rather than weeks. It makes managing a network a joy rather than a chore, and is most certainly an application all administrators should consider. **By Craig Hinton**

SC MAGAZINE RATING

Features	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★★
Performance	★★★★★
Documentation	★★★★★
Support	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
OVERALL RATING	★★★★★

FOR Extremely easy to use, it also has the power and functionality to manage even the largest network.

AGAINST Nothing.

VERDICT Possibly the most outstanding systems management product on the market, ECM 4.5 can turn the administration of your network from a time-consuming headache to a routine task.

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