



DIARY OF AN IT CONSULTANT TRYING A NEW TESTING METHOD

And saving almost a day and a half

For all businesses, time is money, and any amount of network downtime can significantly affect productivity – with reports suggesting that outages can cost organisations thousands of pounds per minute, or even per second. So, when network problems arise – which they inevitably do – they are a matter of urgency, and IT professionals can often find themselves under a lot of pressure to resolve problems quickly and efficiently.

In these economically difficult, highly competitive times, it is more important than ever for IT consultants to work smarter, while providing a consistent and reliable service to their customers.

Trying new network testing methods could be the answer, as Adam Olliffe from IT company Shenstone Business Systems, based in Lichfield, Staffordshire, UK, discovered when he started to use a handheld network troubleshooting device. Below, he takes us through a typical week, and how, over that period he saved almost a day and a half – equating to over £600*.

Monday

I visited a customer that runs a poultry farm. They had just had a new network installed by their onsite electrician, but were experiencing slow connections and their computers were showing network disconnections. The cabling had been tested with a basic wire map meter, but this hadn't been able to identify the cause of the problem.

To test the wiring more thoroughly, I used my new troubleshooting device to run wire map tests on all wiring points (80 in total) and found many wiring problems; either breakages or crosstalk on pairs. The property had a portable office building, and many of the cables installed in the ceiling space were damaged. There was evidence to suggest rodents were responsible, though I suspect the building's sharp metal frame also played a part. I ran new exterior grade cabling, terminated and retested.

On this occasion the trouble shooter saved me a significant 4 hours – based on fault finding on each connection and the provision of improved data compared to a base tester. It was also much more convenient to carry out these tests with a handheld, compact and comfortable device than it would have been with a cumbersome laptop.

Tuesday

One of my domestic customers, a director of a software supplier, was working from home and had a new wireless N router – but their wireless network had a poor range. I used the troubleshooting device to run a wireless network search (the device can test Wi-Fi as well as copper and fibre, which is a huge benefit) and I found over 15 wireless network signals.

Many were from the same ISP and had the same router using similar settings. I reprogrammed the router and set it on a strong, fixed wireless channel, reset it to automatic and rebooted. The new channel had a much greater range and speed.

Here the trouble shooter was a great help, as base Windows settings will not show any data on a channel of unconnected networks, so I would have ordinarily been doing a lot of guesswork. The device probably saved me about 30 minutes.



Wednesday

A magazine publisher in a mixed PC/Mac environment had a DHCP machine showing address duplication and no connections to the network. The network was also running slowly. I ran a network test to find all devices on the network (I was able to store this list, and by using the product's Netmap/Net Verify function I can easily identify any changes to the network in the future).

A new printer in the accounts department had been set up with a fixed IP address in the DHCP range. It was also broadcasting TCP/IP, Appletalk and IPX/SPX despite only TCP/IP clients being on the network.

I reconfigured the IP to a spare fixed address in an excluded range, and used internet configuration to remove unnecessary protocols in use to reduce the network traffic being generated.

On this job I saved around 1hour - based on finding a duplicate host over Windows' builtin tools, and finding protocols in use over those on the Windows host.

Thursday

I visited a customer who manufactures Masonic regalia and ceremonial ribbons, who was reporting a slow internet connection. A check with the ISP showed continual increased usage of connection from previous levels. I used the trouble shooter to run a network test to find the top users of IP bandwidth.

I ran malware scans on the top 3 bandwidth PCs with higher than normal usage. 2 had viruses; once resolved traffic was reduced to normal levels. The high usage on the third PC was deemed normal because of the business activities the machine was used for. Here the troubleshooting device saved me a significant amount of time - at least 3 hours. Without the device I'd have had to run scans on all the PCs, as I couldn't have distinguished network usage without the data traffic analysis the trouble shooter provides.

Friday

One of my customers, an independent financial advisor based in a small office, completely lost network connections on all of its PCs. I used the troubleshooting device to run a net map test and discovered a faulty patch cable, which I then replaced.

Later I visited a customer with a VoIP phone system and PoE handsets, and used the network trouble shooter to detect the power output from the switch, and to also test the bandwidth usage of the VoIP system. The tester proved very useful here - as PC software can't detect PoE devices. On these jobs I probably saved 15-30 minutes - but it all adds up.

Over the course of this week alone I've used the trouble shooter to run a wire map test at a poultry farm, a wireless network search at a domestic property and various network tests at several offices. I've saved about 9 hours - equating to more than £600*. On the basis of these savings the device will have paid for itself in less than 1 month, and I really don't know what I would do without it.

Adam was using Ideal Industries Networks' LanXPLOER PRO, an in-line network tester with active and passive troubleshooting capabilities for Ethernet connectivity and cabling issues in multimedia environments, including copper, fibre and Wi-Fi.

He said: "There are certainly time and cost savings to be made through using a network tester - and it's also helped me to provide a more professional, consistent service to my customers. I operate a relatively small business, but for larger IT companies and network cabling specialists the



savings will be even more impressive. LanXPLOER PRO is very well-built, intuitive and very easy to use – especially in comparison to other products I have tried.”

LanXPLOER PRO has a 3.5 inch touch screen and user-friendly buttons, and most tests can be completed in under three steps. The results of any test carried out are quickly delivered and easily interpreted via a clear, colour graphical display, significantly saving time when fault finding.

Other key features include advanced best-in-class wire mapping by pin and pair with distance to fault, an auto test feature, XML format reporting, a user-exchangeable RJ45 connector, detailed bandwidth monitoring with top ten lists, error statistics and VoIP monitoring and, to future-proof the investment, IPv6 and PoE+ compatibility.

IDEAL Networks

Unit 3, Europa Court, Europa Boulevard, Warrington, Cheshire, WA5 7TN, UK.

Tel. +44 (0)1925 444 446 | Fax. +44 (0)1925 445501

uksales@idealnwd.com

www.idealnetworks.net

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