

by Joe Stoddard

Hooking Up Remotely

It's 7 a.m., you're at the job site with your laptop ready to start the pre-construction meeting, but — oops — the specs you need are on your computer at home. Or you're all settled in at your home office on Sunday ready to crank out that big estimate for tomorrow's sales meeting, but the current price book and CAD files are back at the office. Now what?

If you had been thinking ahead, you'd fire up your Internet connection, start your remote-control software, connect to your office PC, and go to work just as if you were sitting in front of it. Remote-access/remote-control software lets you run applications, transfer files, and pretty much do anything you could do if you were at the office, except put a disk in your CD drive. Here are some choices to get you hooked up.

Commercial Remote Software

There are a dozen or more remote-control packages available. Some, like Symantec's pcAnywhere (www.sym

antec.com/pcanywhere, \$190) or Netopia's Timbuktu (www.netopia.com, for Macs or PCs, \$90 and up), have been around for years and work great, but require a little elbow grease to get set up (see Figure 1). The advantage of one of these packages over the free or cheap solutions I'll describe below is flexibility and features. For example, pcAnywhere lets you reboot the computer you're

connected to and log back on automatically when it comes back online. Commercial packages also offer more connection options, such as direct-dial modem-to-modem or serial cable, in addition to typical Internet connections. And you get advanced file-management capabilities, such as the ability to transfer files in the background. If you're the administrator for

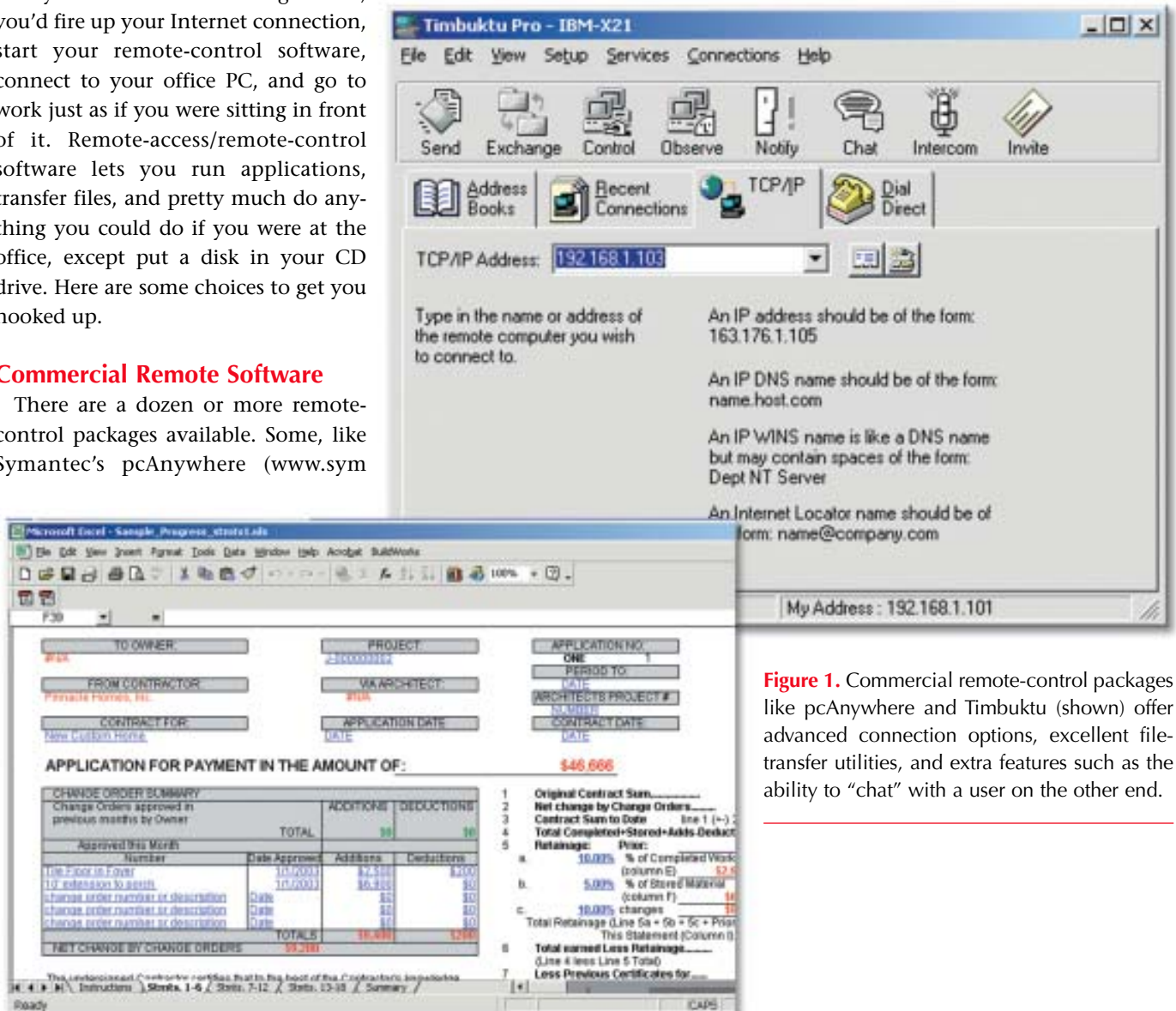


Figure 1. Commercial remote-control packages like pcAnywhere and Timbuktu (shown) offer advanced connection options, excellent file-transfer utilities, and extra features such as the ability to “chat” with a user on the other end.

Computers

your office network and want to work from home, one of these heavy-duty packages might be for you.

Windows XP Remote Desktop

If your office computer is running Windows XP Pro, you already have a free remote-control solution called Remote Desktop. If you're wondering why everyone on your block isn't using it, it's because making it work can be a real hassle, especially if the computer you're trying to connect to is behind a broadband router or firewall (as it should be). Connecting with Remote Desktop in those circumstances requires knowledge of "IP addressing," VPNs (virtual private networks), opening and closing "TCP ports," and "packet forwarding" — plus the patience of Job. Once you get it installed and running, however, you'll be able to cut and paste files between the host and remote machine, run applications, and even play music files

over the connection without spending a dime. But if all that configuration sounds like more trouble than it's worth, proceed directly to the "GoToMyPC" section, below.

RealVNC

A favorite of system administrators who need to work on lots of computers but are too lazy to get out of their chairs and too cheap to buy pcAnywhere is RealVNC (www.realvnc.org). This free, "open source" application installs a "server" component on your office computer and a "viewer" component on your laptop or home office PC. RealVNC has no file-transfer capability on its own, but once you're connected, you can email yourself files or use a separate FTP (file transfer protocol) application. Unlike Remote Desktop, the VNC viewer is available for just about any platform — you can control your office PC from your home OSX Mac if you want! But just as for Remote

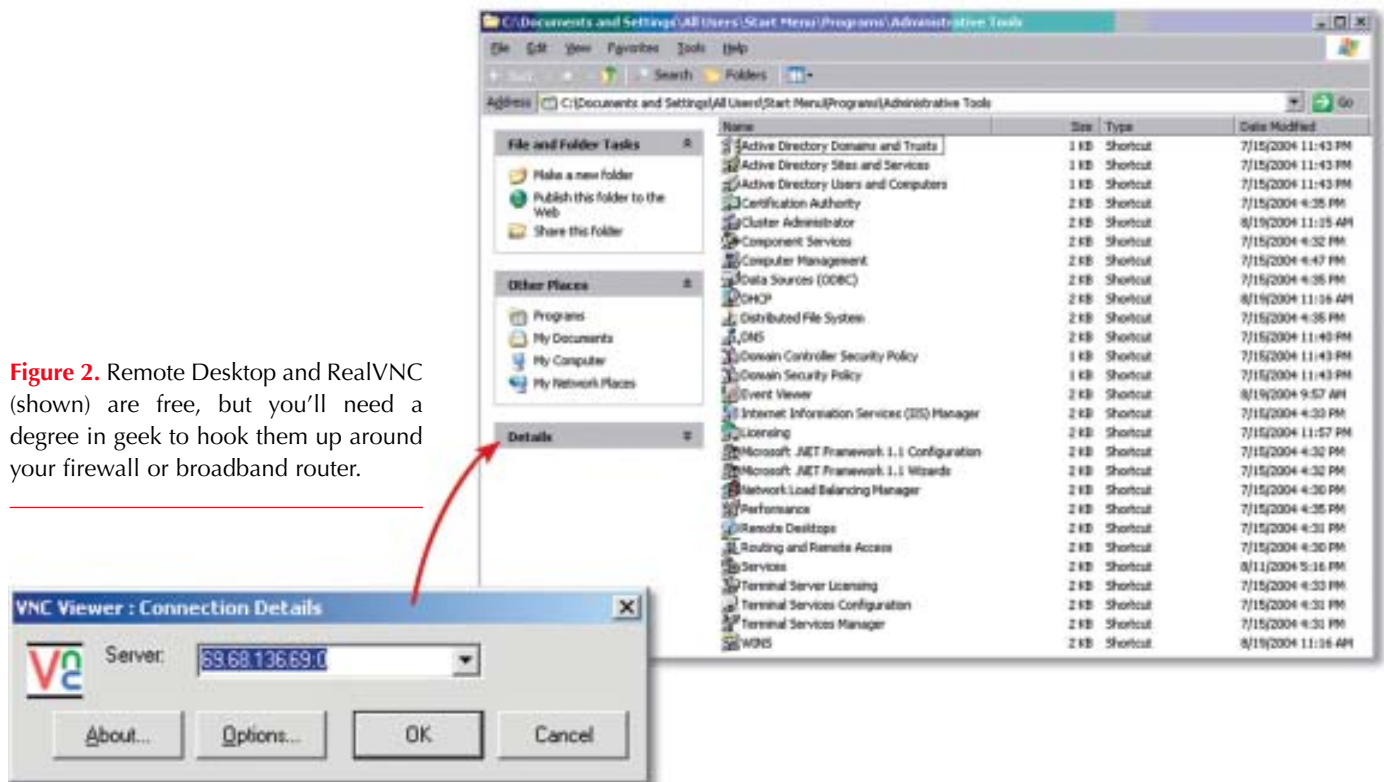
Desktop, you'll need to know how to get under the hood of your office router and firewall to make it work (Figure 2).

GoToMyPC

This is a web-based service that will set you back \$20 per month, but the no-hassle convenience is well worth the price, especially if you're between sales calls and job sites. Like the others, GoToMyPC (www.gotomypc.com) installs a server component on your "host" computer that runs in the background, waiting for your connection. But unlike the others, it uses a web browser to connect, so there's no configuration at all on the "remote" computer. This means you don't even need to work from your own computer: Any computer with Internet access will do (Figure 3, next page).

If you've been on after-hours sales or design calls without a laptop, you'll understand how useful this feature is. If

Figure 2. Remote Desktop and RealVNC (shown) are free, but you'll need a degree in geek to hook them up around your firewall or broadband router.



Easy Project Collaboration with SharePoint

How much would you pay for a secure, password-protected web-site — customized for your company — where you can share and track project documents, photos, discussion threads, announcements, and other aspects of your projects with customers, subs, and whomever else you decide to let in?

What if you could build this site in just a few minutes by yourself, working only from a web browser or your word processor — no programming required?

Just a few years ago, large home-builders were spending six figures to have this kind of site developed for them. Now, starting for around \$20 a month, you can set up a hosted Microsoft SharePoint site that can take care of just about all of your basic document-management and collaboration needs. Because SharePoint is based on Microsoft technology, it works seam-

lessly with Word, Excel, and Outlook. If you're using Office 2003, it will integrate right down to your desktop, letting you create and save SharePoint-destined documents directly in your office applications.

Wooden Block Approach

When you were a toddler, you probably had one of those sets of colored wooden blocks that all fit together in a little wagon. You could put your blocks in there a hundred different ways, and they would all still fit. That's the idea behind SharePoint services. You drag "blocks" called Web Parts into a framework to make each page display the items you want to show your users (see Figure 1). The basic layout is all done for you, but you decide which block goes where on the screen. Microsoft provides many stock layouts and color themes to get you started: a photo

gallery, a document library, a threaded discussion board, and contact lists, for example (Figure 2, next page). From there, you can tweak to suit your needs. You can buy additional web parts from third-party vendors, or, with some programming, create your own.

Workspaces

In addition to a home page for each project, you can create dedicated "workspaces" for specific tasks or activities. Like site templates, workspaces are preloaded with the right web parts for specialized activities. For example, there is a workspace template designed to accommodate online meetings and another for collaborating on documents (Figure 3, next page). There's even a "social meeting" template that could be used for organizing company picnics and the like. Like everything else in SharePoint, if you don't like the stock workspaces, you can customize them or create your own.

Desktop Document Sharing

You determine what your users will see and what they can access when they visit your SharePoint site. Your customers could have access to all of their contract documents and product literature, whereas subcontractors might only be given access to their scopes of work and drawings for their particular trades. At the same time, everyone visiting the site would be able to access general information and your company policies.

You can use a SharePoint site to collaborate on nearly any kind of file, but the system really shines when you're using Office 2003. For example, the "shared workspace" task pane in Word lets you manipulate your SharePoint site as easily as if it were on your own hard drive. Other Office 2003 applications have similar integration. For



Figure 1. Web Parts are the premade building blocks of a SharePoint site. To add them, you just drag and drop.

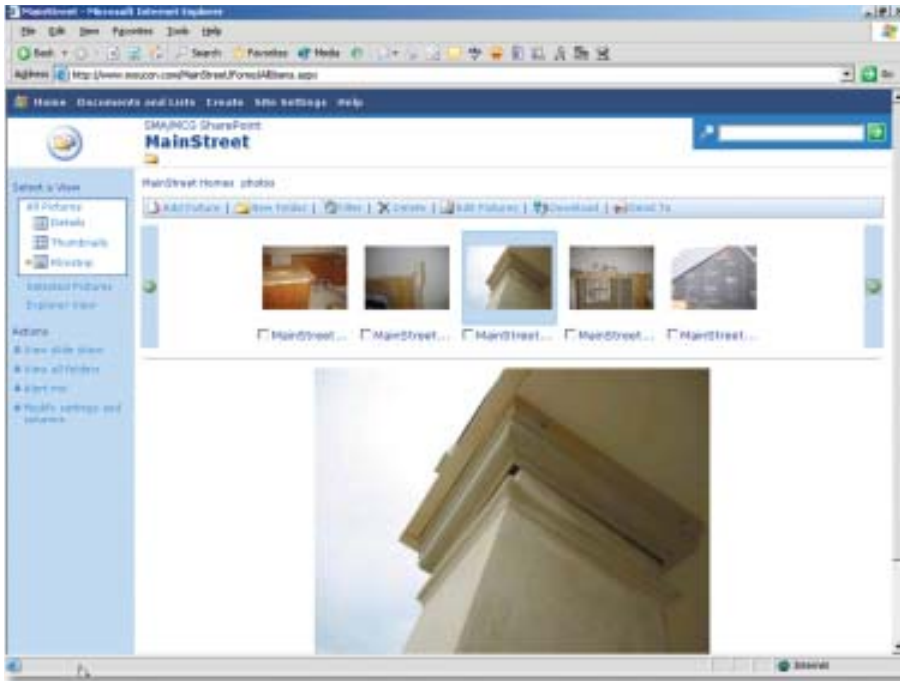


Figure 2. A stock layout for a photo gallery makes it easy to set up this important feature.

instance, a “task” set in SharePoint can be pushed automatically into your Outlook calendar.

Maintenance

Most everything you need to do to maintain a SharePoint site can be done right from a web browser, by logging on as the administrator. But many chores, like uploading multiple images or fine-tuning your overall templates or color themes, are much easier and faster if you have FrontPage 2003, Microsoft’s web authoring tool, which is available separately, or included in some versions of Office 2003.

Getting Started

SharePoint services are available a couple of different ways. The least expensive and easiest way to get started is with a hosted account. The best-value host I’ve found to date is 1&1 hosting (www.1and1.com), which offers SharePoint with 50 users and 500MB of storage space for \$19.95 a month. There are more SharePoint hosts popping every day, so shop around (search on “SharePoint hosting”). If you’re a larger company with your own Windows server, you can also

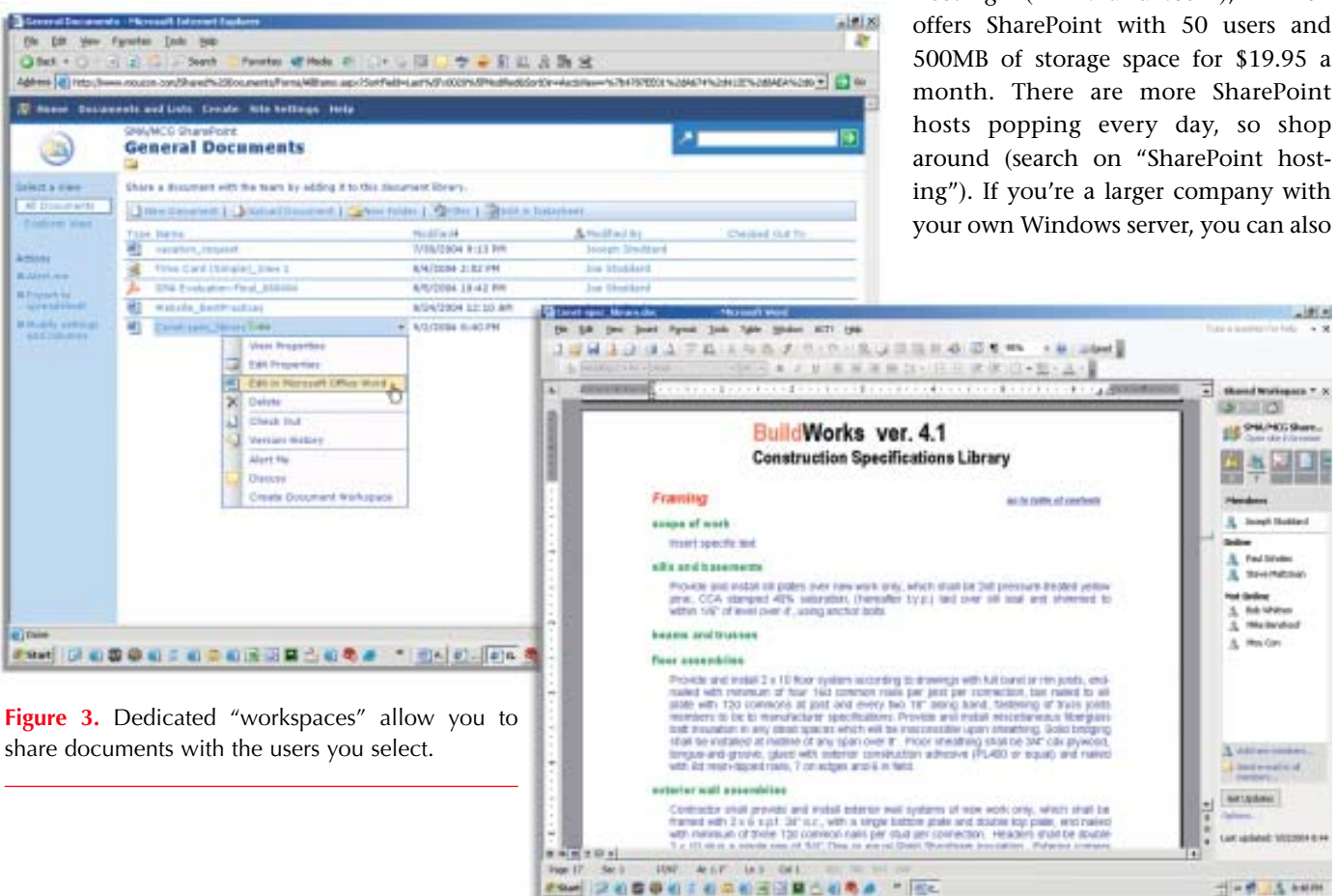


Figure 3. Dedicated “workspaces” allow you to share documents with the users you select.

host your own SharePoint sites. SharePoint is included as part of Windows Small Business Server 2003. Be aware that if you want to host it yourself, you'll need an always-on broadband Internet connection, a business-class hosting account, and some knowledge of Microsoft Internet Information Server (IIS). For most small companies, going the hosted route will be much easier.


SharePoint Issues

It always takes Microsoft a few versions of anything to work all the bugs out, and since this is the second release of SharePoint, there are a handful of

annoyances I hope will be cleaned up over time.

For example, currently there's no way to globally set "alerts" for users. Everyone invited to join the site has to remember to set their own, which can be unreliable, or an administrator has to log on to each account individually to set alerts for them, which is tedious. Another minor flaw is that users are teased onscreen by web parts and resources they may not have permission to actually use, and they won't know they don't until they are greeted with an unfriendly "access denied" error message. It would be nicer if those items were grayed out in the interface, or sim-

ply didn't appear on a user's page at all, unless they had permission to use them.

But all things considered, these are small complaints. With SharePoint, you get a heck of a lot for not very much money. Microsoft has plugged into the next evolution of personal computing: collaboration that blurs the line between your desktop and the Internet. Plus, it's easy to use right out of the box — but as flexible as you need it to be. 

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