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Management Shift

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New software for managing networks meets the unique needs of small, midsize companies

By Aaron Ricadela

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The pain of an unruly network can afflict emerging enterprises most acutely. Expansion, mobility, and electronic information flow can slowly swell networks, leaving IT managers searching for affordable tools to rein in a ballooning array of servers, switches, routers, and hubs. The fate of the business rests in large part on those tools' ability to ensure that devices, applications, and databases don't slow customer access to a Web site, or fail entirely; to keep glitches from plaguing groupware installations serving as central repositories for projects; and to maintain quick access by mobile workers and branch offices to network data through a variety of Internet and dial-up connections.

Cash- and time-strapped emerging enterprises can't always afford dedicated network managers to monitor availability and performance. These companies say enterprise-level network-management software has proven untenable in their environments, requiring granular customization and months-long rollout schedules. Small and midsize companies say they want in-house packages and outsourced offerings that map their network out of the box, then dive deeper into collecting finer data on critical devices, setting threshold specifications to head off problems and taking automatic actions, such as E-mailing or paging an IT manager when a device falls out of spec.

Network-management software vendors are starting to get the picture. Suppliers such as Computer Associates, Hewlett-Packard, Novell, and Tivoli Systems are challenging the perception that their products are costly and take months to deploy. New offerings promise more modularity, fewer levels of customization, predictable pricing, and more proactive controls that can be a boon to IT administrators handling network-management jobs in-house. For smaller customers,