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Map The Network Terrain

Visio 2000 Enterprise Edition takes the pain out of diagramming your network

By CHARLES BRODSKY

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Network diagrams, flow charts and physical office layouts are some of the projects that people think of when they hear the name Visio. But there's a lot more this product can do. Microsoft's Visio 2000 Enterprise Edition is impressive.

All of the core features Visio is known for, such as template-based drag-and-drop diagramming, have been improved and streamlined, and this version adds a few new flashy yet useful tricks to its repertoire.

One of our favorite new additions to this version is an updated user interface, which goes a long way toward flattening out the learning curve. Visio still has extensive support for database design, network diagramming and directory services diagramming, so there is still quite a bit of material to get a handle on, but it's not quite as difficult to find your way through the product with the revamped user interface.

Simpler Navigation

Visio 2000 Enterprise Edition includes four new auto-hide windows that make it easier to navigate the shape drawings. Microsoft also made it easier to update the properties for each shape.

Navigation between pages has also been simplified with the addition of tabbed pages, which work much like those in an Excel spreadsheet. Once you become comfortable with the environment, these features can be significant time-savers. Of course, Visio 2000 Enterprise Edition is fully compatible with its previous versions, their file formats and tools.

Not all the changes in this version of the product are purely cosmetic. Most of the additions are under the

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hood.

For example, the core engine was rewritten and streamlined. Also, Visio now uses the same Windows Installer Technology used by Microsoft Office 2000.

A number of the improvements fall under the umbrella of network diagramming. For example, Visio's SNMP AutoDiscovery technology has been improved. It boasts the ability to discover network devices in Layer 2, Layer 3 and frame relay environments, along with Cisco's VLAN and Spanning Tree information. Another enhancement is to Visio's AutoLayout technology, which automatically generates a network map.

We had no difficulty generating a 20-page WAN map. First, we decided what we wanted to discover, such as routers and other devices. Then, we chose which SNMP communities we wanted to search for and specified a few other options. Visio quickly generated a full WAN map. This map included handy hyperlinks to each device's related page.

Visio's shape library has also been enhanced. It now includes 18,000 shapes that represent network devices.

With that many shapes to wade through, you're going to need a powerful search tool. This version of Visio delivers on that front as well. We were very impressed with the power of its search engine, as well as its ease of use and flexibility.

The search engine uses the master shape numbers assigned by the program to each shape. We found some of the master shape numbers to be cryptic, but overall the search tool makes it easy to find the shape you want.

Besides just being a first-rate network diagramming tool, Visio can now also be used when planning a migration to Windows 2000's Active Directory. It has the ability to import from and export to AD, Novell Directory Services and Lightweight Directory Access Protocol.

Visio's suggested way of migrating to AD is to first map out your existing network, then adapt it to your proposed AD rollout and, finally, diagram the whole thing. When you're satisfied with your diagram, you can export the drawing as an LDAP Data Interchange Format file to AD. You can then use Visio to visually manage your AD implementation.

We also tested Visio's well-known database modeling capabilities. Visio now supports Open Database Connectivity and Object Linking and Embedding, as well as many of the more popular client/server and desktop database programs.

In our tests, we were able to easily reverse engineer a database, as well as display and work with a diagram of an existing legacy database.

Visio also allows you to synchronize your database and its diagram whenever one of them is changed or updated. It provides distributed database development by allowing you to merge multiple databases into a unified project. You can then migrate any changes to the project back to the source databases.

To make the transition from desktop to Web easier, Visio lets you save any of your diagrams as HTML files. We were able to quickly save the 20-page WAN map we had generated during testing and found Visio's browser-based navigation to be very simple.

The Web features don't stop there. Visio can be a useful tool for documenting Web sites as well as for maintaining them. You can map the layout and flow of your Web site simply by connecting to its URL. You can easily search for and repair broken links. In addition to standard HTML tags, Visio also provides support for Java code, Active Server Pages and Vector Markup Language.

Despite all this power, we did discover a disappointing limitation to Visio's browsing capabilities. We could not connect to a secure section of a Web site that was hosted by a Lotus Domino server over the Internet. When we asked a Visio representative about this, we were told that you could only connect to secure sites on the Internet if the Web server maintains security on a per-file or per-directory basis (you know a Web server is doing this whenever you receive a dialog box from Windows asking you to authenticate). But if the authentication is done on the back end, such as when you see the login as part of a Web page, Visio cannot browse into that area.

Overall, we were very pleased with Visio 2000 Enterprise Edition. The limitation on mapping secure sites shouldn't prove a significant issue for most users.

What makes this version stand out are the enhancements to its AutoDiscovery and AutoLayout features, along with the improvements to the user interface. The ability to import from and export to AD, NDS and LDAP directory services can make Visio a very useful tool when planning and implementing your Windows 2000 migration.

The ease of use and extensiveness of its database diagramming and Web capabilities also serve to make Visio 2000 Enterprise Edition a good addition to any IT manager's toolbox.

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