

I'm InTouch 3.52, 01 Communiqué

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The Good: A secure way to control your computer from anywhere in the world without worrying about security.

The Bad: The connection can be slow.

The Verdict: I'm InTouch is best used as an emergency tool for getting stuff from the home computer, not as a daily method of communication.

REVIEW:

Increasingly inventive hackers and thieves are cramping our desire to stay networked. The security issues alone are serious enough to slow down the usual ways of logging in to a remote system.

Time was, you needed only a username and password. That was in the days before graphic user interfaces and villainous enemies. Now you need encryption and an unhackable connection, and you even expect graphics.

There are several packages for connecting to your home or office computer, but one of the most praised has been I'm InTouch, from 01 Communiqué of Mississauga, Ont.

A subscription service, I'm InTouch is a browser-based system that lets the user surf to the host machine via 01 Communiqué's server. The process temporarily downloads a small Java applet onto the client machine, and that applet disappears the moment the connection closes.

Using virtual network computing with single socket layer (SSL) 128-bit encryption, I'm InTouch puts you in control of the host PC, including its file tree and network connections. It even has a separate interface for Microsoft Outlook — the user can be greeted by Outlook's inbox immediately upon signing in. Using it is as easy as if you are in front of your computer.

From there, you can read, compose, send and receive e-mail as though you were at your home machine, and read and manage your contact list and calendar. This obviates the laborious process of synchronizing the PC with a handheld device, which is (by the way) very difficult to do remotely.

Speaking of handheld devices, I'm InTouch also allows communication using a PDA with a Wi-Fi wireless connection or wireless Internet connection. But if surfing your home PC from a Blackberry or a Palm device is possible, it's also tryingly slow.

That slowness, however, sped up a little in April, when 01 Communiqué announced a deal with AvantGo, the popular free service that delivers personalized websites to PDAs and browser-enables cellphones.



Product rating:



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One nice — and potentially useful — tool is that I'm InTouch can activate a web camera attached to the host computer, and stream video to the user anywhere in the world. It's a great way to check to see whether the house is still standing in your absence.

For all its abilities, however, I'm InTouch is lousy with its graphics — a problem that seems indigenous to all remote-connect software I've seen, which reduces pictures to the starved palette of 256 colours, forcing you to download pictures you'd rather look at with reasonable detail.

In describing the host computer as a home machine, I mean to say that this is the way one should use it most frequently. I'm InTouch will work from any PC running Windows 98 and later, of course, and that includes office machines. But we tend to be reluctant to leave the office machines on while we're on the road, leaving them vulnerable to passersby with evil thoughts.

That's because I'm InTouch requires the host machine to have an always-on Internet connection; you can shut the host machine down from a remote location (just as though you were sitting in front of it), but you can't turn it on because that requires pressing buttons.

I'm InTouch works by installing a small version of an Apache open-source web server in the host machine, which runs in the background reasonably unobtrusively, though it takes a while to load on machine start-up. The server runs a diagnostic and then hunts for 01 Communiqué's website; a little satellite dish in the system tray turns green to signal a successful connection.

It also installs a scripting language called PHP, or Hypertext Preprocessor. For most people this is meaningless, but 01 Communiqué's implementation of PHP will make life difficult for programmers who run PHP scripts while developing complex Web pages. In this case, there's apparently a work-around involving making a copy of the PHP.ini file before installation of I'm InTouch and then reinstalling the original file. I can't vouch for this, because I'm not a PHP programmer, but it's worth knowing about if you are.

Installing the latest version of the program is straightforward. It was not so easy in two previous attempts of installing earlier versions, but that could be because of my peculiar home network setup. I've heard other people had similar problems, but the latest version installed quickly and painlessly. If you get a version that is older than 3.2, the first thing you have to do is use the upgrade feature to get around the early bugs.

One thing I learned in my failed attempts is that 01 Communiqué's tech support is very patient and helpful; I wouldn't have discovered this had I started with the latest version, which installed without a hiccup, including a system check for open ports and ways of using my installed router and firewall.

I'm InTouch, being a subscription system, costs \$135 (Cdn.) per year or \$13.50 per month, but the contract puts no restrictions on the number of times you can connect, or how long the connections run.

Though I praise I'm InTouch for its smoothness and ease of use, there's still a little bug in it: It will not work properly on those machines that are running Business Contact Manager as part of the Microsoft Outlook package. With BCM running, I'm InTouch generates a frightening error when the PC is booting, warning of a "catastrophic MAPI" failure.

There are three ways around this issue. One is to ignore it, because Outlook will work just fine simply by calling it up as part of a remote-control session from another computer, the way I would do at home, so it's only one more click. The drawback here is that without the MAPI interface, reading your e-mail at home is impossible on a PDA.

Another workaround is to uninstall Business Contact Manager, and it will run properly on both the PDA and the computer.

A final solution is to wait until 01 Communiqué releases a fix for Business Contact Manager; the company was unaware of the issue until I called.

Otherwise, the package works as advertised, and it works simply and effectively. But it's not a product to be taken lightly, at least not at the price. One must really need the service.

But when one does need it, the price is really negligible