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Remote Control

Tickets? check. Carry-on? Check. The presentation that could elevate you from office nobody to company hero? Oops. Still sitting on the PC in your cubicle.

The problem with taking a subset of your desktop on a trip is that you still might forget a file. One solution is remote-control software, which lets you view your desktop over the Internet from another PC so you can work as if you'd never left your office chair.

The latest user-friendly packages--01 Communique's I'm InTouch, Expertcity's GoToMyPC 4, and Laplink Software's LapLink Everywhere 2--make setting up a remote connection a breeze. Install the software on the machine you want to control (the host). Then, on the controlling PC (the client), go to the vendor's Web site, enter a password, and wait a few moments for a temporary Java applet to download and display the host's screen. And while I enjoy hanging out at WhatIsMyIP.com as much as the next person, here's the best part about these three apps: You don't have to supply your host's IP address or reset any of its ports, as you do with some earlier packages; a central server handles the peer-to-peer connection for you. All three programs even hurdled my firewall with ease.

Because you don't have to install any client software, you can work from any device capable of browsing--laptops, cell phones, and Internet terminals at airports and in coffee shops.

I'll opt for the \$99 I'm InTouch the next time I go out of town and want to be able to access anything on my office PC. Screen refreshes were a bit sluggish over my 56-kbps dial-up connection when I switched applications, but overall response was brisk: I never had to wait for the screen to catch up to my keystrokes. Transferring files--useful for working on documents locally and then sending them back to the host--was awkward but functional. Security is the only issue. As with all remote-control packages, you must leave your host PC running, and I'm InTouch has no safeguards such as blanking the screen of the host PC.

Expertcity's GoToMyPC 4 works similarly but also offers a download-on-demand viewer for maximizing the control window to nearly full screen, and it lets you set up a local printer to print directly from the host. You can even mark the screen for editing or illustration purposes. Unfortunately, as a small-business person I can't afford GoToMyPC's \$180 annual fee. Bigger companies may want to out the program's corporate versions.

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I'm InTouch

I also tried LapLink Everywhere 2, a Web-based remote-control service; unfortunately, it exhausted my patience with sluggish performance. On top of that, it costs \$120 per year for unlimited remote access. For more-complicated needs, such as controlling multiple machines and customizing a full range of security options (including blocking certain files or users), I recommend the \$100 LapLink Gold 11. Like other professional-level packages aimed at help desks, it must be installed on both host and client systems.

LapLink Gold and its rival, Symantec's PCAnywhere 11, offer excellent file transfer capabilities for working on files locally and synchronizing them with the host. PCAnywhere is expensive (\$200), and for me it performed at glacial speed over dial-up. But that was probably because it transmits files in up to 32-bit color, which would allow me to crank out hi-res graphics over a remote connection.

If you like to tweak programs, try VNC for remote control. It's free, speedy, and customizable--but its interface is spartan, and it can't transfer files.