



I'm InTouch...you can be too: Remote access to your PC

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Canada's own 01 Communicate wants to help you stay in touch with all of your information while you're on the go, and it has just the software to make that happen.

I'm InTouch is an application you install on your PC, which acts as a client to the outside world. It reports its IP address to a server at 01 Communicate. Then, when you want to access your data while you're away from your PC, you simply point any Web browser to the 01 Communicate server, and identify yourself with a username and password. You're then redirected to your data using a peer-to-peer connection with your PC.

That's not a typo: you can use "any" Web browser. I'm InTouch eliminates the need for special clients, which means you can use any remote PC connected to the Net, wireless-enabled handhelds, and even cellular phones with a wireless browser. The peer-to-peer setup is also a benefit in terms of security: your PC only reports its address to the server, much like ICQ does, and that information is used only to help your remote connection find your desktop on the Net; none of your data actually goes through the server.

This setup also means your computer doesn't have to have a fixed IP--as it reports its location to the 01com.com server regularly, it's always easy for the remote browser to find it.

The program integrates with your Windows desktop, allowing you to access files on the desktop, your Outlook program, and your contact list from your browser. The client can also translate 200 types of binary files (such as Excel or PDF) into text-readable format, allowing you to access the contents of these files from low-bandwidth wireless devices.

So, if an email comes in with an attachment, you can browse through the text contents of the attachment using your cell phone's display, then send off a quick reply with an attachment located somewhere on your desktop back home. You can even set up your PC to notify your wireless device every time a new message comes in, so that you only have to connect to your home PC when something new arrives.

When you're using the Web browser to access the desktop, you are synchronizing at the same time: any changes you make remotely are made on your desktop. So, if you have new contacts you'd like to add to your home contact list, just add them in over the remote browser, and they'll be waiting for you when you return.

The product also contains some other features previously available in other 01 Communicate products, including video streaming--if you are on a remote connection with enough bandwidth and graphics capability, you can peep into your office through a camera connected to your desktop machine. This can be used either for security or for communication with whoever is on the other end (your family, for example, if you're set up I'm InTouch on a machine at home).



I'm InTouch

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I'm InTouch will also work through a firewall, and a diagnostic tool available in the program simplifies such a setup. Additionally, you can run multiple I'm InTouch machines behind a firewall, as a Unique Computer Name is required to make the connection--that way two employees can keep in touch with their machines at work without problems. And for those who are concerned about the security of company data, all connections back to the corporate network use 128-bit SSL encryption to keep the data away from prying eyes.

Of course, there are potential downsides to the service. For one thing, your PC will have to remain on at all times when you're on the road, if you want to access your data. (This is only an issue if power consumption is a problem, or if your computer is located in an area where the computer fan noise could be distracting--for example, in a small apartment where the PC is located in the bedroom, potentially keeping a spouse awake at night while you're on the road.)

The biggest problem will be for users of handheld devices, especially cellular phones. The time needed to download the information from your home machine could be an issue for those using slower connections (many cell phones still transfer data at 9.6Kbps, which is a positive crawl compared to broadband), especially when you start transferring larger text files.

Another problem is screen size--while using a remote PC at an Internet cafe would pose little difficulty, the smaller your screen size, the harder it will be to manage your data, forcing you to scroll through pages and pages of options in some cases. During a trial run, we were able to get to the data we needed, but in some cases it felt like a marathon, especially on the tiny cell phone window.

As the speed of digital wireless networks improves with the introduction of 1x CDMA networks and the faster GSM/GPRS networks, speed will become less of an issue, though the size of the display will continue to be a problem. It's a small complaint considering the fact that I'm InTouch allows you to connect to your desktop at all--for the convenience of remaining in touch with your data, it's hard to imagine complaining too much about having to go through a few extra steps on a cell phone.

The software to be installed on the desktop will work on Windows 9x, Me, NT, 2000, and now XP. Interested users can download I'm InTouch for a 30-day free trial. The software itself won't cost you anything if you decide you like it, but there will be a monthly subscription cost for using the 01com.com server (which you need to set up the peer-to-peer connection). A subscription costs \$15 per month, or \$150 for a full year.

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Monthly fee: \$15 (or \$150 per year)