

'Big Brother' to check Net abuse

By Minh Lam

IT has been dubbed the Big Brother of the Internet, and the company behind the latest program to control Internet abuse in the workplace hopes it will take off like its television counterpart.

West Perth-based software company WebSpy has released WebSpy Live, which monitors the Internet use of a company's employees.

The program tracks the time employees spend on-line, which Web sites they visit, what files are being downloaded and their size and even how much a particular surfing session costs a company.

This information, collected by firewalls or proxy servers, is relayed instantaneously to the system administrator or any other managers via a pop-up dialogue alert.

Companies can customise the program by dictating what factors - such as file types and sizes - trigger the alerts. According to WebSpy, companies can also use Live to access data on the day's activities to determine browsing habits and traffic patterns.

Live complements other WebSpy monitoring products such as Analyzer and Sentinel, with the difference being Live's real-time monitoring component.

"Live gives us a little bit of an extra edge, and it is a nice interface," WebSpy chief executive Jack Andrys said.

"It is a sexy tool. Techies and managers like it because it's instant information. It is certainly the best tool for functionality and immediacy in getting that information across as to what's happening on the network."

Sydney-based software distributor Janteknology has signed to distribute WebSpy Live and its other programs in Australia and New Zealand, with Live's launch scheduled for this month.

The program should soon be available for a free 30-day trial by the public via beta version, downloadable from www.janteknology.com.au

Janteknology managing director Glenn Miller said Live would cost less than \$500. "To the best of our knowledge this is the first Internet monitoring product to provide a live monitoring capability," he said.

"WebSpy actually monitors Internet traffic whereas blocking products just stop certain types of content from being accessed by users.

"Blocking products have been found to be only about 70 per cent effective and because they work on key words there is often information which a company can use but to which access is denied."

WebSpy was mindful of employee privacy when it developed Analyzer, Sentinel and Live. But Mr Andrys said it was up to companies using the product to ensure privacy issues were handled properly.

"The key thing is that the people using the product should apply it with a (Internet usage) policy," he said. "They should advise the employee that the product is in use and they should treat the people they employ with respect and hopefully get that back."

Internet access abuse at work appears to be increasing. A recent survey conducted by the American Computer Security Institute, with the help of the FBI's computer intrusion squad, revealed a high level of Internet abuse by employees.

It found that out of 538 American businesses, government agencies, banks, universities and medical facilities surveyed, 91 per cent reported insider abuse of net access, up 12 per cent over the previous year.

Closer to home, an AC Nielsen poll released in April found Australian employees spent an average of 6.8 hours a week browsing the Internet for non-business purposes.

"That (6.8 hours) is nearly one whole working day," Mr Miller said.

"No company can afford to pay workers for five days and only get four. Lost productivity due to Internet misuse is a significant business loss."

The release of WebSpy Live comes at a time when the fortunes of the company appear to be on the rise.

The Australian Stock Exchange-listed company, started in 1994 by Mr Andrys, has offices in Seattle and London and is enjoying international sales success with its products.

"We have found sales increasing by 33 per cent every quarter since we started selling in the United States and we keep recording record months as everybody else is screaming doom and gloom," Mr Andrys said.

The location of the Seattle office, just 20 minutes away from software giant Microsoft's Redmond headquarters, had led to a positive working relationship between the two firms, he said.

WebSpy had secured a position on Microsoft's Web site as a recommended add-on for Microsoft's Internet Security and Acceleration Server 2000.

Continued growth would allow the company to look at acquiring other software companies. Now was a good time to buy because of mismanaged dot.coms and a general global downturn in the IT field.

WebSpy would soon start promoting its products in the domestic market.

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