

Product Review: Steve Mastrianni reviews three products that reduce the clutter on your desktop
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OS/2 Warp is becoming more popular than ever. One reason is the BonusPak, which contains OS2CIM, an OS/2 version of a CompuServe navigator; IBM Works, a collection of word processor, spreadsheet, database, report writer, calendar, appointment book, phone book, and charting program; FaxWorks for OS/2; HyperACCESS Lite for OS/2; the IBM Internet Connection for OS/2; Multimedia Viewer; Video IN for OS/2; Person to Person, and the System Information Tool. An impressive list, for sure.

But if you're like me, your desktop is already cluttered with folders and icons for the many programs you use regularly. The last thing you need is more clutter. Finding your applications in the resulting chaos can be annoying. Keeping it organized can be a chore. In my case, I travel a great deal and carry a notebook computer wherever I go. The problems only multiply: no matter how hard I try, the desktop on my office machine never looks like the one on my notebook.

I also switch modes as I work. Depending on what projects I'm working on, I prefer different desktop configurations. When I'm writing code, I'd rather not shuffle through icons for my word processing programs, FAX programs, multimedia, shredder, or the master help index. When I'm developing presentations, I would rather not see icons for my editors, compilers, and toolkits.

If any of these scenarios describes your workstyle, consider adding a desktop manager to your utility set. We'll review three such programs that help you manage, organize, and secure your desktop: DeskMan/2 1.51 from Development Technologies, Inc. (DevTech), Desktop Observatory 3.1 from Pinnacle Technologies, and SkyScraper from Binar Graphics.

Installation

What do you expect from an install program? Would you prefer to simply insert a floppy disk or CD-ROM, type SETUP or INSTALL, and have the installation program guide you through a perfect installation the first time? Would you like to avoid hunting through documentation to find magic incantations that make the process work? My "acid test" for any software is to install it without first reading the manual. Over the years, this simple test has proven a useful barometer of any application's overall usability. All three programs installed easily and smoothly, although Desktop Observatory gave their install program an unconventional name (DOINST), and ended ever so slightly prematurely, forcing me to add manual entries to STARTUP.COMD.

DeskMan/2

DevTech's DeskMan/2 has seniority among the OS/2 desktop managers, and provides a useful benchmark for the others. Using the path settings, DeskMan/2 installed perfectly. The package actually consists of five major components: DeskMan/2, which saves and restores objects on your desktop; PMImage and DM/2 Image, which save and restore your entire desktop; VUEMan/2, which allows you to

create 81 different desktops and switch among them; and the Workplace Shell Extensions, which (on the corporate version) allow you to password-protect your desktop, folders, and SkyScraper arranges desktops by Floors and Desks, and comes with a program launcher similar to Warp's Launch Pad. Floors can have several Desks and Desks can be moved to by using assignable hot keys.

For those of us who frequently confuse objects, folders, and icons, DevTech devotes several pages of the DeskMan/2 manual to explaining these terms and many others. Even among experienced OS/2 users, it's easy to confuse these terms, yet to manage your desktop correctly, it helps to understand the sometimes subtle differences.

To test desktop recovery, I used PMImage to save my entire desktop in just over 2 1/2 minutes. I deleted several objects and then saved a new copy of the desktop. Next, I restored both copies of my desktops, and the restore worked perfectly. In further tests, I used DeskMan/2 to save all of the objects on my desktop and restore them. I also selected certain objects individually, deleted them, and then restored them. Each operation performed without a hitch.

I also tested some of DeskMan/2's special functions that allow you to save time when dragging and dropping objects. For example, you can direct DeskMan/2 to save an object's settings on drop, open an object on drop, or automatically assign an ID on drop. In each case, the functions worked as specified.

I used VUEMan/2 to create what DevTech calls a Virtual Desktop, which allows the desktop to be larger than your actual screen size. It does this by breaking the screen up into separate little compartments that contain small graphical representation of the windows you currently have open on your desktop. You can drag these windows from one Virtual Desktop to another.

Using DeskMan/2's Workplace Shell extensions, you can add extra items to every object's pop-up menu, make objects visible or invisible, close or minimize a folder when an object within that folder is opened, and password-protect the desktop, folders, and objects.

For the corporate user, DeskMan/2 is CID enabled, and special versions support audit control and full-logging capabilities.

SkyScraper

Next, I installed SkyScraper. Except for incorrectly telling me I could install it on my CD-ROM drive, the installation went smoothly. Besides supplying tools to manage your desktop, SkyScraper contains a Program Launcher very similar to Warp's LaunchPad. You can drag and drop applications to the Program Launcher, as well as add objects such as full screen or windowed sessions. Using the manual as a guide, I dragged some objects and placed them in the Program Launcher area and everything worked flawlessly.

SkyScraper arranges desktops by floors and desks. A floor can have several desks, and you can move among desks using assignable hot keys. I created several different desks for specific uses, again without any problems. Despite the wide segregation between different tasks, you will sometimes find objects that you need for nearly every section (the drives object, for example), an option SkyScraper supports by sharing objects across desks. Like DeskMan/2, SkyScraper let me drag applications across different desks.

Skyscraper contains additional functions like Consolidate, which moves all of your original desktop to your current desk. Arrange applications evenly distributes your objects across the desks you defined. Configure lets you set the maximum number of floors and desks, and you can assign hot keys to each of your desks. Like DeskMan/2, SkyScraper allows you to pan your desktop. And, if you tire of constant mouse operations, you may optionally access all of SkyScraper's functions through hot keys. Should you need some assistance, SkyScraper includes an excellent on-line help facility.

Desktop Observatory

Finally, I installed Desktop Observatory and discovered a few minor quirks. For example when the install program finished, the Install button was still highlighted, so hitting Enter started another installation attempt. I aborted this second install and checked my desktop. Desktop Observatory had installed no icon or folder for convenient GUI access. Upon reading the manual, I discovered that I had to manually edit the STARTUP.CMD file to add two lines. While somewhat awkward, this does allow Desktop Observatory to be run from a REXX program or network server.

The next stage of the process was more disconcerting. I had to reboot OS/2 with my original OS/2 boot diskettes, exit the installation into a command prompt, and run DSKINIT.CMD from the Desktop Observatory directory. DSKINIT builds a profile of your desktop and saves it to a file. During these procedures, most of my icons disappeared, leaving me with an uneasy feeling. Desktop Observatory had erased my original OS2.INI file and built its own version. I could only recover my lost icons by running DEINST and changing the attributes of the objects. This is definitely not a task for the average user, and I did not find the procedure documented in the manual.

Overall, Desktop Observatory was much more complex to install and configure than DeskMan/2 or SkyScraper. It appears to be designed as a desktop management application for maintaining secure desktops primarily in large installations, and is not well-suited for the average OS/2 user. Since it doesn't use SOM, it places an unnecessary burden on the user to understand several complex issues related to the Workplace Shell. Just learning to use Desktop Observatory requires a full day of training at Pinnacle's training facility. Users are trained in objects, object attributes, security methods, and LAN support.

In addition, configuring Desktop Observatory requires a detailed knowledge of object attributes such as object ID, parent ID, shadows, object classes, object settings, associations, and resource files. Neither DeskMan/2 nor SkyScraper imposed such requirements.

Once configured though, Desktop Observatory provides configuration and auditing capabilities across a network. Let's say you're the administrator of a 10,000 PC network, and you must add a program accessible to each user. Desktop Observatory can help you make the change and have it automatically installed on every system, including any information stored in extended attributes. Pinnacle claims that building a complex desktop with hundreds of icons takes only around 30 seconds using Desktop Observatory, but I did not verify this. DeskMan/2 can accomplish the same task, but requires some small scripts that Development Technologies will supply upon request.

Desktop Observatory also provides logical desktops that can be customized for each individual user on a LAN client. Each time a particular object is selected, an audit trail is produced to monitor access to that object. The user never sees Desktop Observatory - it runs completely under the covers, allowing the desktop to be set up to resemble a dedicated Windows machine, DOS machine, or menued system. In fact, the user does not even know OS/2 is running. This is ideal in secure environments, such as

government offices or banks. (A future version of Desktop Observatory will be C2 compliant.) Attempts to access protected objects are logged, and it can remove all Settings notebooks from an object. Security is provided by security filters that allow partial or exact matches. For instance, you can deny access to any drives, or only certain drives. You can also have Desktop Observatory completely ignore any unknown objects.

Desktop Observatory traps Ctrl-Alt-Del so a user cannot reboot the system, and it works in conjunction with IBM's DCE Security Services and the MicroSAFE security system. Desktop Observatory allows you to schedule events when an object is detected at its launch or exit time. You can specify your program name, as well as parameter information. Several sample programs in REXX and C are provided as examples of how to do this.

Which One Did I Like?

Although all of these programs are classified as desktop managers, each seems to be targeted to a slightly different market. Desktop Observatory is targeted at high-end enterprise networks, although DeskMan/2 is also capable of supporting large enterprise installations. Its \$179 per seat price makes it a fairly steep investment. SkyScraper, with its lack of password protection and built-in network support functions is more of a productivity tool for OS/2 users in a non-enterprise environment. DeskMan/2 contains most of the features contained in Desktop Observatory and SkyScraper, but it takes a little digging to find some of them. At \$79.95, it's hard to pass up.

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