

Radmin 3.0

Famatech's Radmin 3.0 is a remote-control utility for Windows Help desk professionals and systems administrators who support users and administer systems remotely. Famatech boasts of Radmin's great performance and solid security, and my tests found nothing to contradict those claims. Radmin consists of two components: Radmin Server, which supports connection to and remote control of the Windows system you install it on, and Radmin Viewer, which lets you connect to systems running Radmin Server. Famatech licenses Radmin Server per installed system and allows unlimited use of Radmin Viewer.

Both components install quickly and easily—I had little need of the user manual or the Help file—and Famatech supports remote installation via Group Policy. Radmin Server parameters are stored in the registry, so you can save and customize a Windows Installer installation. Security is always a concern with remote-control products. Radmin uses 256-bit Advanced Encryption Standard to secure all transmissions. You can configure Radmin Server to support Active Directory (AD)-based authentication, or you can choose Radmin's user-based authentication, which employs 2,048-bit Diffie-Hellman key exchange. Both authentication modes let you enable and disable nine feature sets for a fairly granular implementation of access rights. Although an icon in the system tray offers access to Radmin Server's settings window, the icon appears only when the logged-on user is a local or domain administrator. In all respects, including drag-and-drop, right-click, and scroll-wheel operations, using the mouse and keyboard worked on the remote computer just as if I were sitting at it. When you start Radmin Viewer, it presents a connection window that lets you define the Radmin Server systems you can connect to and organize them in folders, as Figure 1 shows. The icons across the top provide quick access to functions, including one-click initiation of a connection with the selected remote system. Radmin's display support is very flexible. Normal mode displays the remote screen pixel-for-pixel in a window on the local monitor; Full Screen mode displays the same pixel-for-pixel image without the window's frame. Stretch mode lets the remote screen fill a resizable window on the local system, optionally maintaining the original aspect ratio, and the Full Screen Stretch view eliminates the frame and fills the screen. In both full-screen modes, the Radmin menu bar floats on top of the remote screen. When the remote screen is larger than the local screen, moving the mouse pointer near one of the edges automatically shifts the display to reveal that edge of the remote screen. When the remote system has multiple monitors, Radmin lets you choose whether to view the entire desktop or just one monitor. In operation, screen updates are quick and complete—Famatech says that screen updates occur as fast as 5–10 times a second even with a dial-up connection. Radmin Server supports up to 32-bit color depth. So that you can reduce the size of the image refresh data screen, Radmin Viewer lets you choose the color depth Radmin will transmit—the options are 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, and 32 bits. In a support situation, communication with the remote user is often crucial. Radmin supports both text and voice chat between users of Radmin Viewer and Radmin Server. In other words, when multiple users connect simultaneously to the same Server system, as they might when someone is hosting a demonstration, all can participate in chats. You can configure Radmin either for silent connection to remote systems or require the remote user to authorize the connection. View-only sessions are easy to initiate. Each access mode (e.g., full-control, view-only, voice chat) is independent of the others—so, for example, a person running Radmin Viewer can request a text chat with someone at an Radmin Server system without opening a remote-control session. Other useful features let you transfer files and the contents of the clipboard between systems and let you connect in Telnet mode to work with a text-based console window. Telnet capability uses Radmin's secure communications and doesn't open a Telnet port on the server system. Radmin does have some limitations. Although Radmin Viewer happily operates in the x64 environment, Radmin Server lacks support for x64 versions of Windows. (That feature is in development, with availability expected around the end of 2007.) Also, Radmin Viewer doesn't display the screen contents of remote systems that are operating with a command prompt window in full-screen mode. With the improved version of Windows Remote Desktop that Microsoft distributes with Windows XP SP2, why would you want to spring for Radmin? For several reasons. Radmin is simply much more pleasant to use than is Remote Desktop. I loved the ability to switch from full screen to a window with the click of an icon and the fact that the only special key sequence I had to remember is the one I configured to send a Ctrl-Alt-Delete combination to the remote system. Radmin's File Transfer window was always available when I wanted to copy a file in either direction. The ability to organize remote computers in a tree hierarchy is really convenient, and the multiple-viewer feature is great for consulting with another technician. Remote Desktop is fine for occasional use, but if you're responsible for user assistance or for server applications that don't have remote console support, Radmin will make your life easier. Overall, Radmin is easy to work with, remarkably compatible with the mouse and hot-key requirements of a variety of applications, and replete with features that will satisfy most systems admins. For those weary of dealing with the complexity of Remote Desktop and looking for another solution, I highly recommend Radmin.