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18.11.2019 **24**

Solve PC problems professionally

Remote Support Software Review

PRODUCTS

AnyDesk

ISL Online

pcvisit

Remote Utilities

RescueAssist

SupRemo

Teamviewer

VNC Connect

ISL Online Score

EASE OF USE FOR REMOTE USERS   ⊕⊕

FEATURES   ⊕⊕

WWW.ISLONLINE.COM

⊕⊕ Excellent   ⊕ Good   ○ Passable   ⊖ Bad   ⊖⊖ Very bad
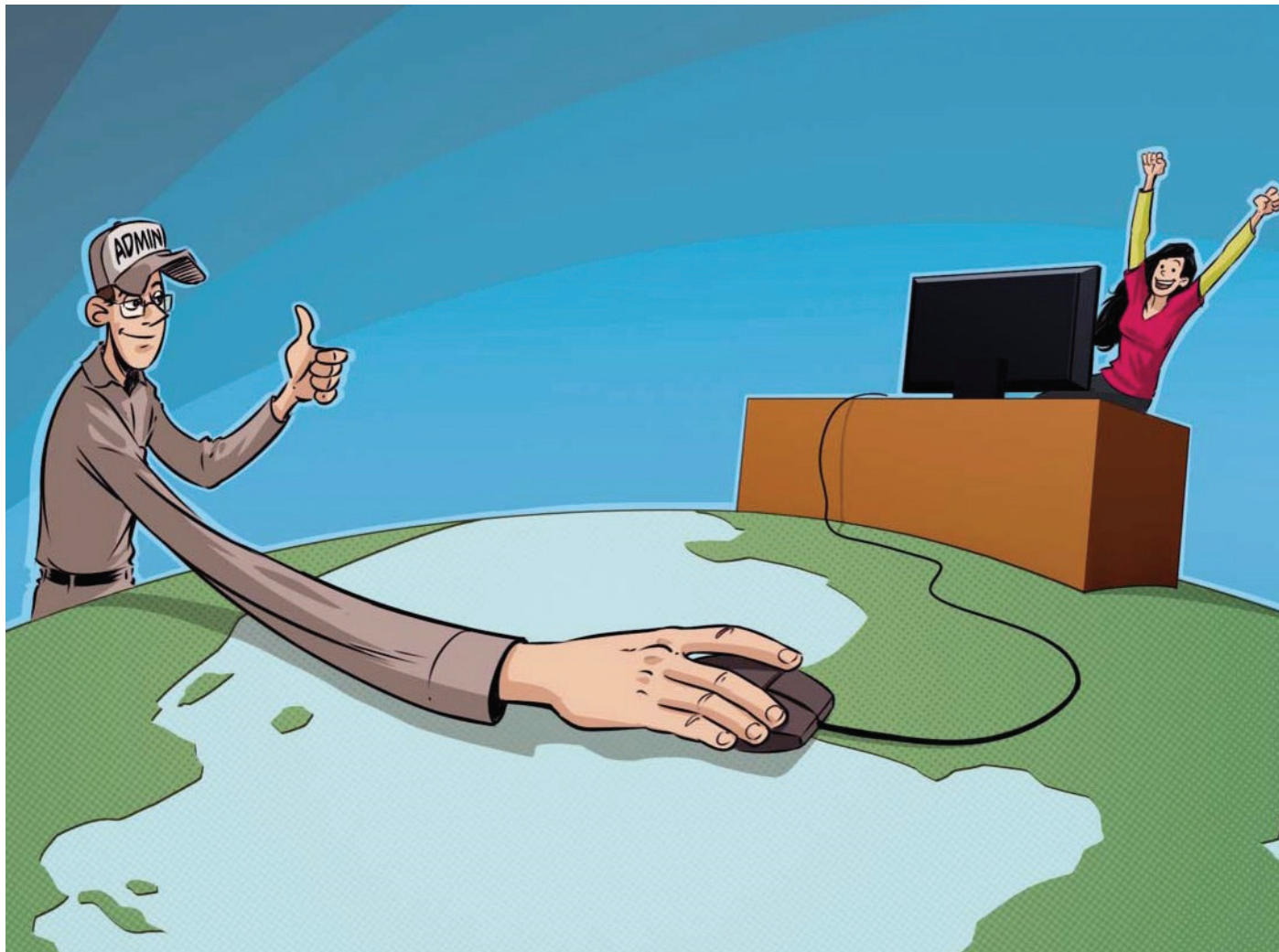
Image: Albert Hulm

Long Reach

Remote administration for experts

Plenty of programs can be used to access other PCs remotely for assistance, but not all of them are a useful option for commercial users. We also found big differences in the ease of use for the person seeking help.

By Jan Schüßler

Remote administration software, with which an expert or an assistant can access a remote PC to solve a problem there, might be aimed at a wide variety of target audiences. While some time ago we looked at solutions that are free of charge for private customers and that require mobile access apps [1], the focus this time is somewhat different: software that commercial users can use to help their customers.

At first glance, the market for such programs is huge. However, not all products are actually easy to use, especially for

the person who will be doing the work in the end. An important criterion for us when selecting candidates was therefore that even novice users should be able to get to grips with it as quickly as possible. That is, easily manage to download and start the connection tool, enter an access code that they are given by the support technician, and then just send a few confirmations that the expert is allowed to connect to the computer. By default, the tool should not require any installation or configuration. This eliminates Windows' own remote desktop connection and VNC

products that are not capable of connecting across NAT boundaries and therefore require a VPN. Google's Chrome Remote Desktop is also eliminated - it requires a Google Account. In addition, at least the customer side of the software should offer a German language interface.

For the technician or service provider, functions such as connection logging for later billing are a welcome addition. As is the possibility of being able to call on manufacturer support if problems arise.

In contrast to our last comparison for private customers, some available features are not as important. For example, because a professional technician usually carries a decent enterprise laptop with him when he's on the road, we consider the availability of client apps for Android and iOS to be optional. It can help in an absolute emergency, but is not an essential criterion. That's why we look to see if such apps are available and test them briefly, but don't put them through their paces in earnest. For commercial customers, it is also irrelevant whether they can use the product free of charge indefinitely - most products exclude business use from their free offers.

Enterprise customers have other requirements on top of this, such as the possibility of having software automatically rolled out and configured for hundreds or even thousands of workstations via group policies. This also isn't our focus here - our target audience are independent IT supporters who regularly carry out remote maintenance for various corporate or private customers and perhaps employ a small numberof people.

The Candidates

With these criteria in mind, eight products made it into our test field: AnyDesk, ISL Online, pcvisit, Remote Utilities, LogMeIn RescueAssist, Nanosystems SupRemo, TeamViewer and VNC Connect from RealVNC.

From a technical point of view, such software consists of two parts: a host, also called a server, and a client. Contrary to what the names might suggest, the host is the piece of software that receives the remote access connection, so it runs on the computer of the person seeking help. Because this software often runs at the client (as in the client of the support company), some manufacturers confusingly refer to this as the client module. On the other side, the expert uses the client program, sometimes also called a viewer, to access the system of the person seeking help. Some manufacturers strictly separate host and client into different software packages, in other cases both functions are contained in one program. Sometimes both options are available, such as with Team Viewer, where the standard program includes both features, but a simple QuickSupport module is also available for inexperienced end users.

The usual procedure for a remote admin connection is that the technician first provides his customer with a URL from which the customer downloads a connection tool. Some providers have special landing pages where the customer seeking help simply downloads the tool and sometimes must even enter an access code given to him by the technician. Alternatively, some clients allow the technician to send an invitation email.

Granting Access

The connection is established by entering a numerical code, usually eight to twelve digits long, which, depending on the provider, is either communicated by the customer to his technician or vice versa. The customer may then have to accept a UAC query to allow access to the screen and to give the remote expert control over his system.

The providers handle these permissions differently. In the standard configuration, AnyDesk, RescueAssist and VNC Connect do not run with admin privileges; the technician can request them with a single click, which requires the customer to interact again - he has to approve the privilege escalation on his end with a UAC query. In the case of pcvisit, the standard administrator rights lead to a somewhat strange situation: If the technician wants to set up permanent, unattended access, a dialogue asks the customer whether he wants to allow this process - which the technician can simply agree to himself.

AnyDesk is the only provider whose solution allows the customer to deselect various permissions (input, sound, ses-

LogMeIn's RescueAssist runs entirely within the browser - handy if you often switch the device you are helping other people from.
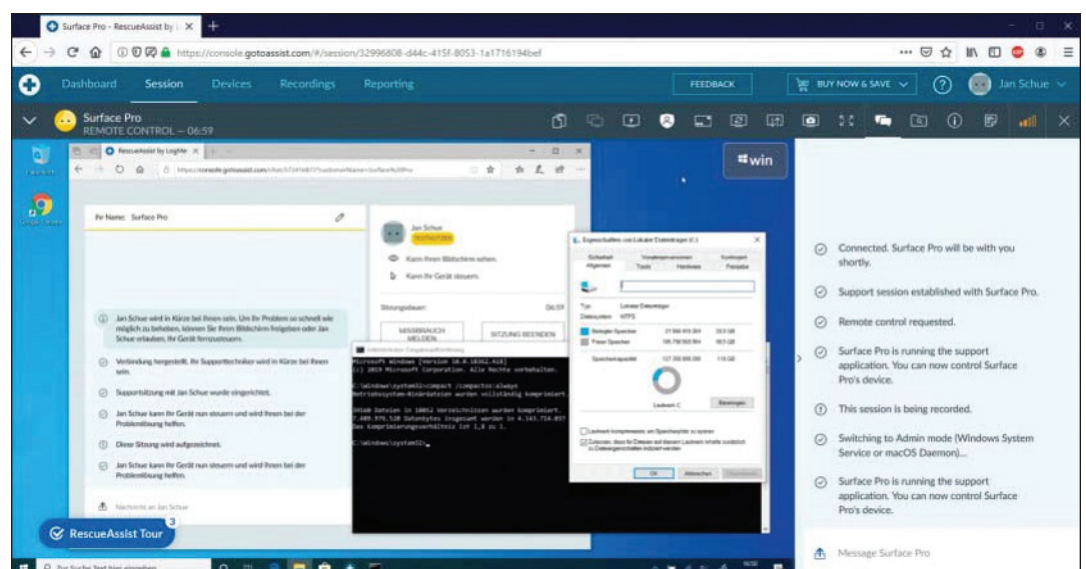
sion recording, etc.) before allowing the connection.

Features

Beyond mere remote access, the candidates in question offer a varying degree of additional features. Chat functions, a module for file exchange and a shared clipboard are standard, but only Any-Desk, ISL Online and TeamViewer can move files back and forth. A function that sends the key combination Ctrl+Alt+Del can also be very helpful. All candidates offer it, but it did not work with AnyDesk (button grayed out) and RemoteUtilities (no effect).

More rarely seen is the ability to draw something on the remote screen (AnyDesk, ISL Online, TeamViewer, VNC Connect), an option to send session invitations by mail (ISL Online, pcvisit, RescueAssist, TeamViewer) or video telephony features (ISL Online, TeamViewer). Surprisingly, not all candidates offer the option to save sessions as video files - it is missing in SupRemo and VNC Connect. With pcvisit, the recordings are made in Flash format - in 2019 this seems almost like a joke.

Only ISL Online, LogMeIn and RealVNC operate dedicated landing pages where end users can download the remote maintenance program easily. With Any-Desk, pcvisit and SupRemo, the programs can be downloaded directly from the regular homepage of the manufacturers with one click. With RemoteUtilities, the user must first click through to the download page and then download one of the three host variants (installation packages are available in EXE or MSI format and there is an installation-free program). Although TeamViewer offers the software directly on its home page, the "QuickSupport" module, which is particularly suitable for inexperienced end users, unfortunately is not directly linked there.

No Such Thing as a Free...

The prices differ significantly. With pcvisit and Remote Utilities, commercial customers may also use the software free of charge to some extent. Interestingly enough, the range of functions is hardly limited in this case. But the free licences are only suitable for very occasional use. Remote Utilities can control a maximum of ten target PCs in this mode; pcvisit is limited to five remote sessions per month.

AnyDesk

Prices for AnyDesk start at around 100 euros per year for the basic package (one user with one simultaneous session). For 200 euros per year, the Professional rate is available: This conveys the right to use the software on any number of devices. One simultaneous session is included; each additional session costs an additional 100 euros per year. Also included are session logging including a REST-API, central deployment and white label customisation (add a company logo, deactivate incoming or outgoing connections). If you pay 500 euros per year, you get a universal license for any number of simultaneous sessions. All price models are annual contracts.

If a client attempts to establish a connection, the software not only asks the user in front of the target PC for permission, but also which permissions he wants to grant - individual functions such as file transfer, shared clipboard, session recording and remote control can be prohibited.

The software can run on the desktop on both client and host without installation. In a real-life working environment, it gets out of the way and lets admins do the necessary work. AnyDesk also allows to control Android mobile devices. To do so, an add-on must be installed on the device - this is currently available for devices from Samsung and HTC. On iOS devices, only the screen is transmitted; remote control is not possible.

⊕ **Flexible permissions**
⊕ **Many supported platforms**
⊗ **Mobile clients are a bit wonky**

ISL Online

The entry-level price for the remote administration solution ISL Online from Slovenian provider XLAB is 95 euros per year. In return, the customer gets a licensing package with 500 minutes of connection time - ten minutes per week - which are billed by the minute and can also be used for several simultaneous connections. If you pay 339 euros a year, there are almost no restrictions - but only one simultaneous session is allowed. You may pay 99 Euro on top for an unlimited number of simultaneous connections - but per workstation. Large customers can also purchase licenses for self-hosting the software.

ISL Online makes it easy for the person seeking help: After going to a dedicated landing URL and entering an eight-digit key, the user downloads the ISL Light Client (which is technically the server). After the software has been started, the rest of the connection is set up automatically. The user only needs to agree to a UAC request. To set up unattended access, however, the full ISL Light software must be installed and provided with a team login.

Connection setup and operation is straightforward and the feature range is convincing. Options for drawing on the screen and setting markers on the remote desktop are included. The shared clipboard also works for dragging and dropping files, but only to send them to the remote computer.

⊕ **Easy to use**
⊕ **Features**
⊗ **Unlimited package is expensive**

pcvisit

The pricing structure of pcvisit is simple: It can also be used free of charge commercially, but only five sessions per month are permitted. The full package costs 150 euros per user per year. A hardware remote diagnosis tool can be added (100 euros per year). An independent licence to host pcvisit on your own server costs 150 euros per year.

On the side of the remote PC, either an installation-free ad hoc customer module can be used or a host can be installed. The latter can also be installed directly within the framework of an ad-hoc session. Strangely, on the remote PC, a question is asked whether the support technician is allowed to install the software, but he can also answer this himself. Otherwise, remote maintenance is uncomplicated with this tool. Features like quick access to standard Windows components like the control panel, group policy editor and registry editor are very handy.

The very detailed log is not scaled correctly on high-resolution screens and therefore appears tiny. pcvisit does not offer mobile client apps; instead there's a browser client. It worked fine on iOS and Android in testing, but compared to LogMeIn RescueAssist (see two boxes to the right), it is very basic. pcvisit confirmed that it will be enhanced in the future. Video recording of sessions is in Flash format, which sounds like a joke, but it's not.

⬆ **Pricing structure**
⬇ **Records Flash video**
⬇ **Minor inconsistencies**
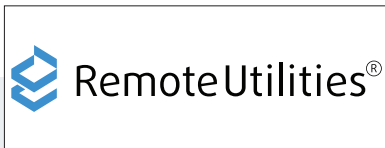
Remote Utilities

The price of the permanent (!) licenses for Remote Utilities are determined based on the number of permitted endpoints. In the free tier this is ten. The Starter Package (99 USD) extends this to 20 endpoints and includes email support; "Mini" (249 USD) can access 50 endpoints and also receives remote support from the manufacturer. For 500 USD, you can access as many endpoints as you want and receive priority product support. Unlike most other solutions, there is no need to have a user account with the vendor; only the negotiation of network connections is done through a vendor server.

To connect, the support expert needs an ID and PIN from the other party; alternatively, the supporter can enter the destination IP or hostname. The software offers all kinds of administrative tools: Task manager and command prompt can be opened in separate windows. However, the Task Manager is a far cry from what we are used to from Windows 8.1 or 10 and rather reminds us of Windows XP.

The user interface reminds us of Microsoft Office with its ribbon interfaces. There is no automatic shared clipboard, only the possibility to synchronize the clipboards with menu command in one direction or the other - this is bulky and only works with plain text. Sending Ctrl+Alt+Del also did not work. If the target PC was in standby at some point, the connection setup fails afterwards or turns out to be fiddly. The text log is quite confusing.

⬆ **Permanent licenses**
⬆ **No online account needed**
⬇ **Rough and old-fashioned interface**

RescueAssist

LogMeIn charges 468 USD per supporter per year; with the option to terminate the contract on a monthly basis, it's 688 USD per month. For 14 USD per month per technician, you can add support for mobile device access (remote view for Android and iOS; remote control for some Android devices). As one of two vendors in this comparison, LogMeIn also allows its subscribers to sign up for shorter contracts than one year. This increases the effective annual price by about one third. This product should not be confused with LogMeIn Rescue, which is targeted at enterprise customers (and significantly more expensive).

RescueAssist is a browser-based application - LogMeIn does not offer viewer apps, whether for desktop or mobile systems. It's very easy to use and the web dashboard is very clean. Sessions are automatically recorded and are usually available online for viewing a few minutes after they've ended. Even on the remote side, where a small program needs to be downloaded and run, any interactions with the technician, such as chatting, file transfers, etc., occur in the web browser.

Despite the high comfort for both sides of the support experience, the range of Features is comparatively narrow - for the highest price in the test field there is neither a drawing function nor a video chat; the transmission quality cannot be adjusted either.

⬆ **High comfort**
⬆ **Completely browser based**
⬇ **Expensive**

SupRemo

Italian provider Nanosystems is charging comparatively low prices for its remote support solution SupRemo. A license for single simultaneous connections costs 98 euros per year. For 178 euros the subscriber can buy a package with three sessions; additional sessions can be booked for 39 euros each. As one of only a small number of the tested applications, SupRemo can be subscribed to with shorter contract terms: Namely quarterly for 33 or 59 euros per month respectively - yearly subscribers pay 25% less.

The software is both client and host at the same time and requires no installation. If this is wanted, it can be installed on the host using a system service for unattended access. The setup is pleasingly simple.

Compared to other solutions, it lacks a few advanced features - in particular, there is no session recording, which could be an immediate disqualification for some potential customers. The fact that details like a drawing function and video chat are absent and the transmission quality cannot be changed manually is probably something many customers can overlook - especially considering the comparatively low price.

The user interface sometimes started in English in the test and is only incompletely translated overall. In addition, the remote customer first ends up on an English website - but since there is a large download button right there, so we didn't consider that to be a problem.

- ⊕ **Simple pricing structure**
- ⊕ **Easy setup**
- ⊖ **No recording of support sessions**

TeamViewer

The simplest TeamViewer license for single users is 335 euros per year for one user with one simultaneous session. The multi user license for 695 euros offers logging, team management and any number of users - but still only one simultaneous session. The team license for 1500 euros per year offers three simultaneous sessions in addition to other management functions. Additional simultaneous sessions cost 443 euros per year on top.

TeamViewer, which is sometimes used as a generic term for remote administration programs, leaves hardly any wishes open, as long as the customer has enough money to pay for it. Some extravagant examples are a ticket system, the augmented reality tool Pilot or the administration of smartphones. Remote control of Android devices is available for most manufacturers.

QuickSupport is the simplest possible module for novices at the other end of the support call. It does not annoy with questions about operating modes and licensing, but simply displays an ID and a password immediately. The configurability is excellent; in test operation TeamViewer runs smoothly and very unobtrusively.

We have noticed that the sound output is turned down by 80 percent when the "Communication" ribbon is folded out for a remote connection. This is due to a function of Windows itself (which can be turned off in the control panel) to turn down all other sounds during calls; however, it's strange that the mere unfolding of the ribbon triggers this.

- ⊕ **Features**
- ⊕ **Configurability**
- ⊖ **Prices**

VNC Connect

The British provider RealVNC is best known for its unattended access software, but also offers a VNC Connect license for instant support, which allows connections to any number of destinations. With the smaller Professional license for 170 euros per year, three connections may be simultaneous. For double the price, you get ten as well as the option of incorporating your own branding into the software.

The host software requires no installation and can be easily obtained via a landing page. Nice: To get admin rights, the technician can choose whether the remote user should confirm this via UAC query or whether login data for an administrator account are known. By default, a remote connection is initially opened without administrator rights.

VNC Connect also runs in a nicely unobtrusive way. Unlike most other products, however, unattended remote access is not possible - these licenses are intended exclusively for support with an active counterpart. Apart from this, we only have some small niggles: The file exchange tool does not offer a view of the client's folder structure, which makes frequent file transfers a bit uncomfortable, and the account management is only available in English and shows session times in the log exclusively in UTC, rather than the local time zone.

- ⊕ **Easy to use**
- ⊖ **Not everything is translated to German**
- ⊖ **Only works with a person in front of the supported device**

TeamViewer has a reputation in the industry for charging exorbitant prices. This reputation is not completely wrong: The entry price of 335 euros per year can quickly be driven up considerably if you need several users or more than one remote maintenance session running at the same time. Or if you want to support mobile devices. But there are higher base prices: US provider LogMeIn charges 468 euros a year for its RescueAssist. In return, the user gets convenience, but not too many features, and it's a completely browser-based service. There are server apps for remote computers and mobile devices, but no separate client software - it runs entirely in the browser.

Otherwise, most prices start at around 100 euros per year with slight differences in licensing per user and workstation. Then there usually are corresponding price increases.

Most vendors do not concentrate
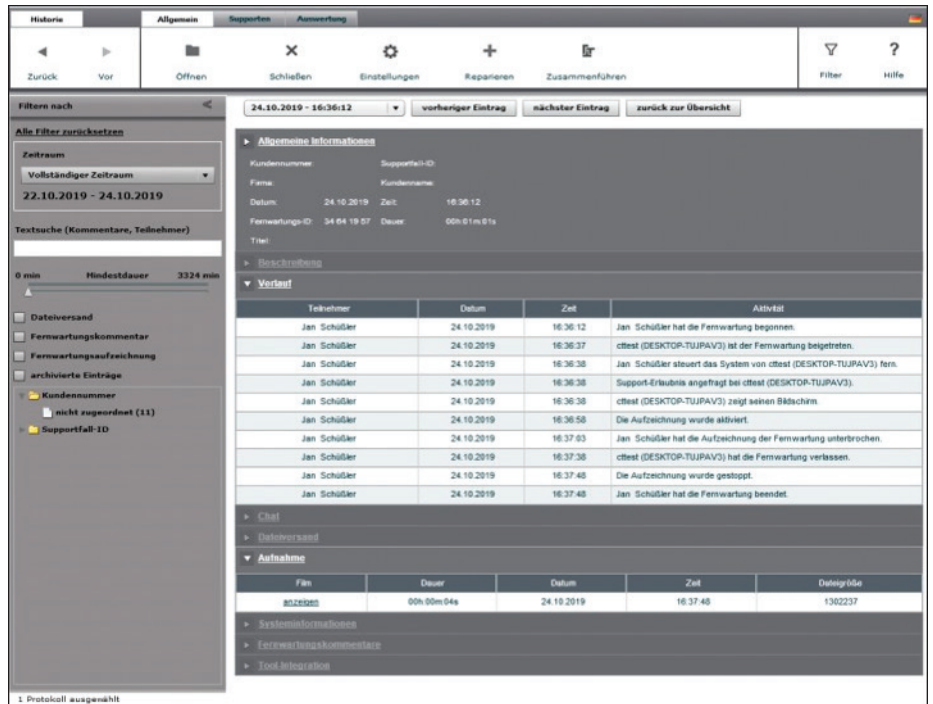
pcvisit comes with its own program that evaluates logs and displays them in detail.

Commercially Usable Remote Administration Software

Product	AnyDesk	ISL Online	pcvisit	Remote Utilities	RescueAssist	SupRemo	TeamViewer	VNC Connect
Provider	philandro Software GmbH	XLAB d.o.o	pcvisit Software AG	Remote Utilities LLC	LogMeIn Inc.	Nanosystems S.r.l.	TeamViewer GmbH	RealVNC Ltd
Website	anydesk.com	islonline.com	pcvisit.de/en	remoteutilities.com	gotoassist.com	supremocontrol.com	teamviewer.com	realvnc.com
Commercially usable free license	–	–	✓ (5 sessions a month)	✓ (max. 10 remote systems)	–	–	–	–
Client app usable without installation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Compatibility according to provider								
Supporter side (client)	Windows, macOS, Android, iOS, Linux, FreeBSD, Raspi, Chrome OS	Windows, macOS, Linux, Android, iOS	Windows, macOS, Browser (Web-App)	Windows, Android, iOS	Webbrowser	Windows, macOS (beta), Android, iOS	Windows, macOS, Linux, Chrome OS, Android, iOS, Blackberry, Windows 10 Mobile	Windows, macOS, Linux, Raspi[3]
Client side (host)	Windows, macOS, Linux, FreeBSD, Raspi, Android (only Samsung, HTC)	Windows, macOS, Linux, Android, iOS	Windows, macOS	Windows	Windows, macOS, iOS, Android	Windows, macOS (beta)	Windows, macOS, Linux, Chrome OS, Android, iOS, Blackberry, Windows 10 Mobile	Windows, macOS
Settings								
Turn off wallpaper	–	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	✓	–
Transmission quality adjustable	✓	✓	–	✓	–	–	✓	✓
Proxy adjustable	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓[1]	✓	✓	✓
Connection features								
Chat function	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Video conference	–	✓	–	–	–	–	✓	–
File exchange	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Send Ctrl+Alt+Del	✓[2]	✓	✓	✓[2]	✓	✓	✓	✓
Draw on screen	✓	✓	–	–	–	–	✓	✓
Combined clipboard	✓ / sends files	✓ / text only[4]	✓ / text only	✓ / text only, manually	✓ / text only	✓ / text only	✓ / sends files	✓ / text only
Default admin permissions	–	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	✓	–
Disconnect remote side	1 click	2 clicks	1 click	1 click	1 click	2 clicks	1 click	2 clicks
Management								
Address book for past connections	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	(–)[5]
Generate email invitations	–	✓	✓	–	✓	–	✓	–
Unattended access	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–
White label options	✓[6]	✓	✓ (for Professional option)	–	–	✓	✓	✓ (Enterprise option)
Save sessions as videos	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	–
Connection log	✓[6]	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Manage teams	–	✓	✓	–	✓	–	✓	✓
Landing URL for customers	–	islonline.net	–	–	fastsupport.com	–	–	realvnc.help
End user process (default configuration)	Download and execute, send code, allow connection	Enter code on landing page, download and execute, UAC query	Download and execute, enter code, UAC query	Find download, download and execute, UAC query, transmit code and password	Enter code on landing page, download and execute	Find download, download and execute, UAC query, transmit code and password	Download and execute, transmit ID and password, UAC query	Download and execute, enter code, confirm session
Ratings								
Ease of use for remote users	⊕⊕	⊕⊕	⊕⊕	⊖	⊕	⊖	⊕	⊕⊕
Features	○	⊕⊕	⊕	⊖	○	⊖	⊕⊕	⊖
Minimal price (per year)	€100 (1 device, 1 simultaneous connection)	€95 (500 minutes included)	– (free)	– (free)	€468	€98 (1 simultaneous connection)	€335 (1 user, 1 simultaneous connection)	€170 (3 simultaneous connections)
Next higher price tier	€200 (many devices, 1 simultaneous connection)	€339 (1 simultaneous connection)	€150 per user	Continuous license €99 per user (20 connection endpoints)	€688 (mobile devices included)	€178 (3 connections, more possible)	€695 (many users, one connection)	€340 (10 simultaneous connections, white label, logs)
Contracts available for less than a year	–	–	–	–	✓ (monthly, 25% more expensive)	✓ (quarterly, 33% more expensive)	–	–

[1] Via browser settings [2] Didn't work in our tests [3] Mobile apps available, but without quick support [4] Drag & drop files towards the remote system [5] Available, but not included in the quick support tier
[6] Professional tier and onwards

⊕⊕ Excellent ⊕ Good ○ Passable ⊖ Bad ⊖⊖ Very bad ✓ Available – Not available n. a. Not applicable

on the number of allowed users, however, but on the number of remote maintenance sessions that the customer can use simultaneously with the selected tariff - so-called simultaneous connections. More simultaneous connections are usually what drives the price up the most. And this is absolutely understandable from a pricing point of view: If the customer is not an occasional freelancer, but a very busy self-employed IT specialist, who may also have support staff, the productivity of his company is directly based on how many customers it can assist at the same time.

The US provider Remote Utilities is special: The company sells its software of the same name not as a subscription, but as a permanently valid one-time license. This has the usual advantages (no subscription fee), but also well-known disadvantages (upgrades to new major releases cost money).

Speaking of subscriptions: The usual term for contracts is one year. Only LogMeIn from RescueAssist (monthly) and SupRemo from Nanosystems (quarterly) offer shorter terms, but ultimately slightly higher effective pricing.

Conclusion

Objectively speaking, the most appealing overall package in the test comes from Team Viewer. It offers excellent configuration options, all kinds of extensions and extensive support for accessing Android devices. However, keeping the pricing in mind, one question that quickly presents itself to the potential customer is: Do I really need all of this?

Passable alternatives, which do not lack any essential features, are available from AnyDesk, ISL Online and pcvisit - with the latter you should especially consider how important mobile access apps are to you. SupRemo and VNC Connect should only be looked at by those who do not need video recording of sessions.

In a way, LogMeIn's RescueAssist is special: it's expensive and not overly well-equipped, but it's very easy to use and its web interface makes it accessible from any computer with a web browser.

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[1]   Jan Schüßler, An den Nagel hängen, Fernwartungssoftware statt Turnschuhadministration, c't 13/2017, p. 92

islonline

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