This dog can hunt

WatchDog software tracks where 'Net users go — and what they look at / Hiawatha Bray

Ever get the feeling that your computer is watching you? Mine has been keeping an eye on me, and I don't much like it.

I've been trying out a clever, creepy piece of software called Internet WatchDog that tracks every move I make on my office or home computer. Despite its name, Internet WatchDog doesn't track just on-line activity; it keeps a log of every program running.

The program was created by Algorithm Inc. in Atlanta, and is being marketed by Charles River Media in Needham. I've run Internet WatchDog on my home machine for about a week now, and I have only one problem with the product — it works. It's a super-piece of software that makes my skin crawl.

Blame it on experience. Years ago, I worked at the US Postal Service on an electronic mail sorting machine. In those days, Postal Service managers assumed that all workers were lazy and dishonest. We were constantly watched through video cameras and two-way mirrors to make sure we weren't stealing anything. And computers monitored us at the sorting consoles to ensure that we put forth our maximum effort.

Programs like Internet WatchDog could bring some of that same flavor of paranoia to business offices all over America. But David Palli, president of Charles River Media, says that's not what he has in mind. Palli says his goal is to provide companies with more efficient ways of monitoring Internet activities.

"We did not believe in censorship or in blocking," Palli said. "Internet WatchDog doesn't block access to any sites, nor does it prevent users from accessing information." He adds that the software is designed to be an aid in monitoring network usage.

When that happens, it takes a screen snapshot, marks it with the date and time, and files it away. Even if you don't change screens, a snapshot will be taken every 15 minutes. Then the boss can see the same images you've been looking at all day.

The program will save up to 10 megabytes of data — more if the boss asks for it. You can go back in time and see exactly what an employee was doing on his computer at 2:15 p.m. on Wednesday.

Internet WatchDog has only been in use for a few weeks, but already, Palli has gotten lots of feedback. "When I hear from the CEOs, they love it," he said. "They can see what their employees are doing, and they know what they're doing."

Of course, employers aren't the only ones who can use Internet WatchDog. Palli is also selling his products to parents and school systems who want to monitor their children's use of computers. Indeed, Palli estimates that about 60 percent of his customers so far have been parents and school systems.

"All the talk about kids on the Internet is fine for parents," Palli said. "But I think we need to monitor all employees, no matter how well they work."

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One of the features of WatchDog is automatic screen capture, which takes a screen snapshot whenever a user looks at something new. The software marks the snapshot with the date and time and stores it away.