

Open all hours

PC-Duo Enterprise is a well-established systems management tool. But can the revamped HelpDesk module offer you the support you need?

BY KAY EW BANK, CONSULTANT EDITOR

Enterprise HelpDesk, a web-based system for centrally tracking and managing helpdesk issues and calls, is a central component of the well-known desktop management suite PC-Duo Enterprise. The module consists of a number of components. There's the HelpDesk Server that manages the databases containing the issues and definitions (such as queries, reports and layouts) for an Enterprise HelpDesk project. You have the choice of storing the databases in either SQL Server or the Access Jet engine. There's also HelpDesk Web, a web-based application that is the main interface with which your users will work. They can use it to enter details of any problems they're having, to query the database to see whether the database already contains details of how they might resolve their problems, and to generate reports. The web interface makes use of a web server component working on a server running Internet Information Services.

Administrators work via HelpDesk Admin, from where they can create projects, manage users and user groups, and set up e-mail notifications. Similar options are available in a web-based administration tool. The final element in the system is a Web View

Editor that you can use to create web views in the form of either HTML or ASP pages for your Enterprise HelpDesk projects (Figure 1).

The main change in this version is better integration with the rest of PC-Duo Enterprise. HelpDesk is now integrated with the inventory, so you can automatically see the configuration in terms of the hardware and software of a user's PC from the HelpDesk. It's also integrated with NetSupport PC-Duo Remote Control. This means you can control the user's PC remotely, including across the Internet. The web-based access also means there's no need for NetSupport PC-Duo Control on the local computer, because the web-based remote control uses an ActiveX control. Also included is the Crystal Reports 9.0 Runtime Software, which Enterprise HelpDesk uses to display custom reports. And you get a built-in HTML report engine.

How it works

The key idea behind Enterprise HelpDesk is that different people using the software will want to interact in different ways and see different views of the same underlying data. Suppose a user has had a problem with a particular application. They open a web view and tell the system that they want to report a problem. They can specify the urgency of the problem and the general area in which it occurs, in this case printing. They provide a brief summary of the problem, and a more detailed description. That's all that is required to begin the process of solving the problem, and the advantage of using the web-based view is that the user could be working at any physical location, and at any time of the day or night. There's no need for a person to be manning the helpdesk before the process can begin. If the user wants, they can attach explanatory files, such as a screenshot, to the issue.

Next, someone with authority among the helpdesk staff checks for newly reported issues, and works out how to deal with them. Some problems will already have solutions; others will not have occurred before. Assuming the problem is a new one, the group leader (Enterprise HelpDesk's term for the administrator type figure) will choose someone within the helpdesk team to deal with the problem. This ensures that someone has responsibility for finding a solution. When the analyst

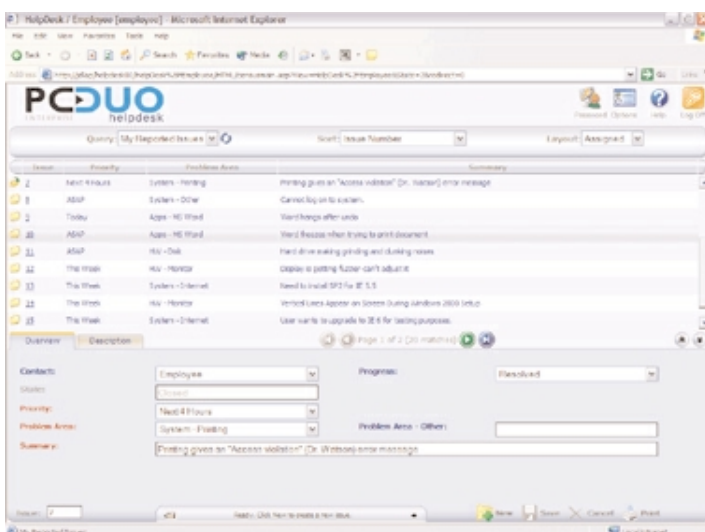


Figure 1: HelpDesk Issue Tracking custom web views. These web views include only the fields and queries relevant to the user's role in the helpdesk process

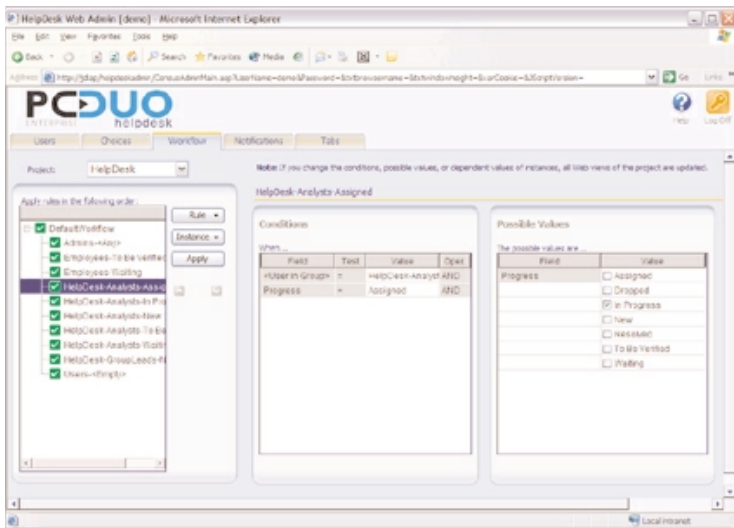


Figure 2: The HelpDesk web-based workflow editor enables you to define and edit the process rules for your helpdesk workflow

who's been assigned to the problem logs on, they will be told of the new issue and will be able to work out a satisfactory solution.

As each person logs on to the system, their user details will identify the role they occupy in the helpdesk system, and they'll see a different view appropriate to their needs. The progress of a particular issue through the system can be automated using workflow management tools within Enterprise HelpDesk to ensure issues are tackled in the right order and in an appropriate fashion (Figure 2). You can use process rules to define how an issue is treated in its different stages (new, assigned, resolved) to make sure that when an issue changes state, it is correctly handled.

You can also use automatic e-mail notification using a set of rules that trigger automatic e-mails when a problem is logged, updated, or when the underlying fields within the database are set to a particular value.

Question time

Among the highlights of using PC-Duo Enterprise HelpDesk are its query facilities. There's a set of predefined queries for the most likely questions you'll want to ask – finding all the assigned issues, for instance. In addition, it's easy to create ad hoc queries that test the values in a particular field, so you can check for a word or phrase occurring in the summary or description field, for example. You can also search on date or time related information to find all the issues that were submitted in a particular time period.

Once you've created an ad hoc query, you can refine it by combining it with other queries, both ad hoc and predefined. You can combine the queries using And to narrow down the list of

matches, or use the Or operator to see a larger list.

If you have more sophisticated requirements, you can use various operators, including Contains, Like and Not Like, along with wildcards where necessary to check for any single character or set of characters. For example, the query

Summary Contains "printer"

will find all the issues that contains the word 'printer' anywhere in the Summary field, including those cases where printer appears within another word. The Like operator is used for cases where you want a more exact match. For example, the query

Summary Like Cannot print

will find only those issues where the Summary field says something like 'Cannot print'. For a slightly wider set of matches, Like would be used with the wildcard operator %, which matches any set of characters, so you might have

Summary Like password rejected%

which would find all the issues where the Summary starts with the text string 'password rejected'.

Another strong element in PC-Duo Enterprise HelpDesk is its set of reports. As with the queries, you start with a set of around 30 predefined reports showing most of the information you are likely to want to find about your helpdesk issues. The reports include summary, detailed and trend information. If you want to go further, you can create your own ad hoc reports using Crystal Reports. To do this, you will need a full licence for Crystal Reports, but your users won't need additional licences because PC-Duo Enterprise HelpDesk includes the Crystal Reports runtime. Crystal Reports enables you to create customised listing reports that show your data in graphical formats such as pie or bar charts.

Inside information

Everything described so far is available just with PC-Duo Enterprise HelpDesk. However, if your organisation has a licence for PC-Duo Enterprise Inventory, the helpdesk operator can view all the information about the hardware and software on a PC by just typing in the name of the computer.

Enterprise HelpDesk is easy to use and powerful. The different views prevent confusion on the part of the users while enabling the helpdesk personnel to see the more detailed information they need. <

System requirements

SQL enabled SQL Server 7 and above; Windows NT 4 (SP6), 2000, or XP; disk space requirements depend on database size (minimum of 90Mb); Internet Explorer 5.01 or higher.

Access enabled Microsoft Access database (included); Windows 95, 98, NT (SP6), 2000, or XP; disk space requirements depend on database size (minimum of 90Mb); Internet Explorer 5.01 or higher.

HelpDesk Web (web views) HelpDesk Web users require Microsoft Internet Explorer 5.0 or later, or Netscape Navigator 6.0 or later; cookies, Java and Javascript must be enabled.

HelpDesk Web Server Internet Information Server 5 or above.

UK supplier

Pillar Solutions
Tel 01732 363670
E-mail
sales@pillar-solutions.com
Web
www.pillar-solutions.com

Price

PC-Duo HelpDesk is licensed per console (HelpDesk personnel):
5 HelpDesk licences = £3,474.24
10 HelpDesk licences = £5,558.52
20 HelpDesk licences = £11,117.04

Bottom line

Pros Easy to use, flexible system for managing IT helpdesk issues.

Cons You need a full Crystal Reports licence to create custom reports.