
FLUKE NETTOOL

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Sometimes less can be more, especially where network test equipment is concerned. Several of the feature-rich connectivity testers on the market are bulky, expensive and difficult to use for first-line technicians. These testers often have an abundance of options and abilities that are seldom used in basic network testing. Network analyzers also can be dangerous in unskilled hands because the tester can generate undesired network traffic unknowingly. And, often a technician may need two or more testers, a laptop computer, diagnostic software and sometimes the assistance of network engineers to get to the root of network problems.

Fluke Networks addresses most of these with its new NetTool Connectivity Tester. Positioned in Fluke's lineup between its DSP (digital signal processor) wiring testers and the OneTouch series network analyzers, the palm-sized NetTool combines the most desired elements of network analyzers and cable-scanning equipment. It has an easy-to-use interface designed to bridge the gap between network and PC technicians.

Fluke has created an all-in-one tester that does exactly what it sets out to do: test the network, PC link and wiring at the first-responder level. Well-designed and with intuitive controls, NetTool seemed to be thinking for me on more than one occasion during my tests. And the unit's small size is an advantage; it fits easily on a belt, in a laptop case or in a tool bag.

NetTool has six push-buttons (including the power switch), and its easy-to-read display and three-color LEDs combine to help give a technician tremendous insight into the desktop-to-network connectivity environment, including network characteristics and key network resources. The unit also provides a very practical approach to looking at network wiring. Additionally, NetTool is strictly passive, so it won't interfere with network traffic.

NetTool is powered by four AA alkaline batteries or an optional AC adapter. Battery life is an estimated 20 hours of normal usage. A serial cable is provided to allow for tester screen-shot captures to a PC and also is used for software upgrades through the included NetTool Blaster support software. I upgraded the software on the demo unit provided by Fluke and found the process to be fast and painless. As with other Fluke products, NetTool software upgrades will be available on a CD or downloadable via the Web, according to the company.

NetTool is configured in two models that differ only in firmware (and cost), and tests can be run in single-ended mode or inline mode. NetTool configured for single-ended testing verifies a live network connection, speed and duplex of a link, key devices on the network (IP, Novell NetWare and NetBIOS servers, along with routers and printers), health of the connection and observed protocols. Individual protocols can be tagged as "unwanted" and will be called out as problems if found on the network.

The tester shows cable length on a horizontal cable not connected to the network and individual pair lengths without

needing a remote adapter. Patch-cord integrity can be verified by using both RJ-45 jacks on NetTool. For those charged with upkeeping a cable plant as well as the network, NetTool can provide most of the functionality of Microtest's Microscanner and Siemon Co.'s STM-8 testers. Fluke's NetTool can verify wiring.