Back from the dead

Resurrecting a dead Windows installation is a soul-destroying exercise, but one that's been made much easier thanks to O&O BlueCon 6.0

BY KAY EWBANK, CONSULTANT EDITOR

As a systems administrator, there are some things you just don't want to see – you don't want your e-mail system to go down; you don't want a disk crash; but possibly worst of all, you don't want a machine that has a complete system crash. If you sit attempting to get Windows XP to start, unable to get it to come up in even the most limited way, you know you're in for a miserable time. It can be even more frustrating when you know that the problem is probably something fairly minor, and if you'd been working on Windows 98 or a DOS system, you'd have been able to start the system using a DOS emergency startup disk.

O&O BlueCon 6.0 offers a potential solution. It's a toolkit of system tools that can be used to get crashed Windows systems up and running without the need to start again with a new installation, and the software works even if you can't get the system started.

In addition to getting dead Windows installations restarted, BlueCon has tools to help you rescue lost data and change forgotten passwords. Even more usefully, you can start O&O BlueCon from the CD-ROM drive even if it isn't installed on the machine. This means you can get at systems that won't recognise the hard disk at all; so long as you can get the CD-ROM to work, you're in with a fighting chance.

Of course, if you're faced with a system that won't boot, you always have the choice of reinstalling Windows from scratch, but you then face the prospect of reconfiguring the system, reinstalling applications and tracking down data.

Moving around

BlueCon's main interface looks like normal Windows – you get a task bar, a Start menu and a variety of program buttons. You can use the mouse to move around and start to navigate through the utilities, and there's a command-line editor if you need to work with some of the more basic files.

If you're working on a crashed system, you can use the SRPManager utility to work with Windows system restore points (SRPs). These points give you a way to revert to a previously saved system configuration when the current configuration is causing problems. This is great if Windows will start, but doesn't help much if it won't. SRPManager gives you access to your SRPs even under those circumstances. It has a wizard-driven interface to make it easy to choose the restore point you want to use.

Using SRPs, you'll be able to get the system up and running, then scan for problem drivers or system services and, once they're identified, restore them to their previous condition. Alternatively, a utility called DeviceManager lets you deactivate the driver or service until you can work out the best solution to the problem. It can also be used to replace problem drivers and services with a new version.

DeviceManager has two functions – driver management and service management. You use the DriverManager utility to control the startup settings of both hardware and software drivers, and can set the drivers to be disabled, to start before other drivers or after the boot drivers have loaded, or to manual so you

Figure 1: BlueCon guides you through various choices of what's gone wrong and offers three data recovery utilities to help you put things right again

can start them by hand after the system has started. The service management function can be used to customise the startup type of Windows services.

BlueCon is bursting with features. For example, FileExplorer gives you a way to get the data off the system onto external storage media. This offers the advantage of read-only access, so you know you're not causing more damage to the system. If you suspect that the problem arises from a system registry setting, you can use BlueCon's registry editor to change or correct registry settings. There's a SystemInfo command you can use to view the configuration of win.ini, system.ini, boot.ini, the Autostart entries and the environmental variables.

In addition to these tools, you get a disk checker, an event viewer and a prompt line where you can type the sorts of commands that used to be present back in the good old days of DOS – attrib, dir, mkdir, passwd and so on.

You also get a Control Panel where you can set parameters, screen resolution, language and keyboard settings and time zones, activate the network and select the operating system.

Password control

Not all the tools in the BlueCon toolkit are designed for crashed systems. If you've lost the administrator password for your Windows XP system, usually your only option is to re-install Windows. However, BlueCon provides an alternative as it comes with a tool that lets you delete or change passwords for local user accounts so that users can regain access to their systems. You can even reset a password without knowing the old one – a somewhat scary thought.

If your concern is data security, BlueCon has an extended delete feature that lets you delete particular files, folders, partitions, hard disks or the entire system in a much more robust way than that offered by the normal Windows delete options. The SafeErase utility has five different methods of deleting the data and, according to O&O, you can overwrite your data up to 35 times.

Going the other way, if you want to retrieve data that has been 'normally' deleted, BlueCon comes with a set of data recovery utilities. These are DiskRecovery, FormatRecovery and UnErase (**Figure 1**). These recover data when it has been accidentally erased, when the disk has been formatted, and when everything else has failed.

UnErase has an Explorer-like file structure that lets you navigate around your deleted files and folders. The status of the files and folders you're looking at is identified using different

icons, so you can identify folders or files that have been deleted, or folders that are intact but have deleted files within them (**Figure 2**). If the original filenames or folder names can't be restored, the files and folders are given automatically generated names by UnErase. You can limit the list of files being displayed by setting a filter to look for files that were created or modified in a particular date range, say, or for particular file types, or for files containing some specific text. When you've found the files or folders you're looking for, un-erasing them is a matter of a single mouse click.

FormatRecovery can be used to look for data on drives that have been accidentally reformatted. You can also search on any storage media, from USB sticks to memory cards for digital cameras. Drives can be scanned for previous partitions and file systems, so you can still look for deleted data if a partition has been deleted or a volume has been reformatted with a different file system.

DiskRecovery has similar features to FormatRecovery, but can be used even if a new operating system has been installed, when Windows can't access the hard drive and when the other utilities fail to recover the files.

O&O BlueCon is an excellent set of tools if you are faced with a Windows XP system that refuses to work. It gives you back the sort of control that has been eroded under recent versions of Windows. You won't always succeed in getting crashed systems up and running, or retrieve data that's been deleted in error, but it gives you the best chance possible. If you fail with BlueCon, you're unlikely to succeed with anything else. <

System requirements

OS Any Windows operating system.

Processor Pentium III or comparable.

Memory 256Mb, bootable CD or DVD drive.

UK supplier

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

Price

£421 for one administrator user licence (includes one year's maintenance).

Bottom line

Pros Great set of tools for rescuing machines.

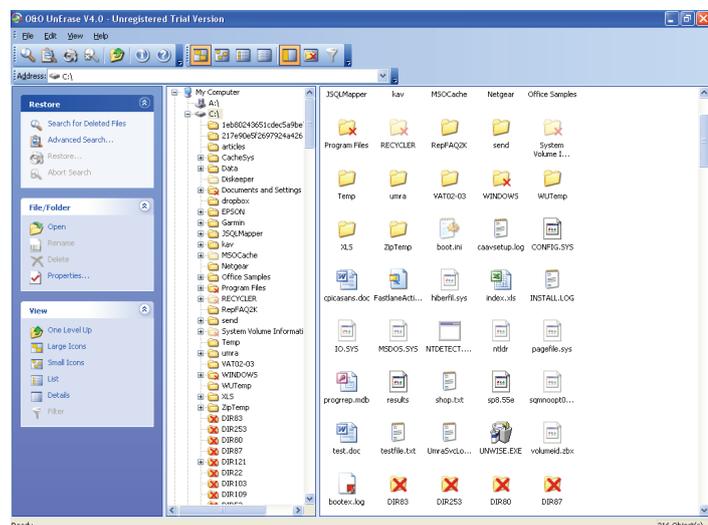**Cons** Might be a security risk in the wrong hands.

Figure 2: You can see what's happened by checking the icons – deleted folders are shown with a big red cross, folders with deleted data with a small red cross