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Take this GUI and shove it

In many cases, a command-line interface makes life easier than some fancy GUI. Here's why

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A few weeks ago, I posted [a bit of advice for VMware amid speculation that the leading virtualization company might purchase Suse Linux from Novell](#). (As in: Don't do it.) Since then, I've taken hits in comments and in email, mostly in response to my criticism of the YaST tool that serves as Suse's central management console.

Plenty of people commented that if you don't like YaST, you don't have to use it, which, while technically true, doesn't accurately reflect the problems you may encounter if you use YaST alongside traditional shell management.

[[Paul Venezia knows networking](#). Check out his [Networking Deep Dive Report](#). | See [InfoWorld's 10 tips for boosting network performance](#).]

Also, YaST is one of the primary differences between Suse and other Linux distributions. If I'm going to toss YaST, why wouldn't I just use CentOS or RHEL or any number of other distributions? After all, what differentiates one distro from another in the server space? Management tools, the software update tools, directory paths, and the choice of default packages. After that, it's all just Linux.

Even though I singled out YaST, I find nearly all GUI management tools for network devices and servers more trouble than they're worth -- except on Windows, where there generally isn't a choice. Even there I'll head for the CLI (command-line interface) for many tasks.

This preference isn't technocodgerism, it's based on the reality of day-to-day network and server administration.

Think back 15 years or so to the four main players that were producing routers and switches: Cisco, 3Com, Nortel, and Cabletron. Of those four, only Cisco consistently maintained a CLI-based management framework, while the others offered text menus to configure their gear. Some also included a crippled CLI shell, but they were all pushing their ease-of-use over Cisco's comparatively obscure CLI. Of those four companies, only Cisco thrived while the others either failed completely or have been marginalized.

Also, in 1996, two new networking companies were founded: Extreme Networks and Juniper Networks. Both companies made the CLI the administration tool of choice, and both companies are still around and doing well.

Of course, many different factors led to that Darwinian triumph, but the fact of the matter is that most high-end network architects and admins cannot stand menuing interfaces on network gear. It



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makes just about everything harder by trying to make a few things easier, and for many like me, that's a nonstarter.

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[uke](#)
4-Oct-10 6:52am

captcha registration and still the spammers manager to register!

Count me in the CLI camp. GUIs trick people into thinking they know what they are doing, often with disastrous results.

[registering_is_unhelpful](#) How many network admins do know what sed is? Let alone use it

4-Oct-10 7:27am

1 reply

Let's face it. You, Myself and other old timers do have some understanding of using utilities to speed up our work. However, WE ARE AN EXTINCT BREED.

CLI is very helpful in management of IT infrastructure. However, many IT managers don't have any clue on using CLI utilities, They lack programing skills and they know when and on what to click. That's the IT today.

[Matt Cary](#)

4-Oct-10 6:49pm

>How many network admins do know what sed is? Let alone use it

I would guess that many more people know sed now than knew it 20 years ago. Many newbie admins of today will be power admins 5 years from now.

It's true that there are many more people now who admin systems by GUI, but we shouldn't let the vendors dumb down our essential tools. It serves no one in the long run.

[tscoff](#)

4-Oct-10 9:58am

I agree completely. I find it entertaining that the more time I spend working in IT the more I work with a CLI. It's more reliable, it works faster, and it's easier once you get over the initial learning curve.

My employer cares about results. The faster something gets done the happier my employer is. So I work with a CLI and I expect people working for me to learn it too.

[Linatux](#)

4-Oct-10 4:49pm

I prefer CLI, but there are plenty of times (less familiar tasks) I find a menu/GUI easier. What I hate is when the gui doesn't refer to the .conf file but uses it's own stored settings. YaST (last time I used it) was awful for this. Change something manually - works fine. Use gui to change something else & your manual change gets overwritten - unacceptable!!!

[JasonDick](#)

5-Oct-10 4:51am

I have to agree with this article rather strongly.

GUI's are great when you are only going to perform a task every once in a great while, so that the primary time sink is learning the system. Any good GUI is always going to be much faster to learn than a CLI.

But this pretty much discounts the usefulness of GUI's for any sort of serious system administration tasks. Sure, YaST is great for the single-user PC (it's one big reason why I run OpenSUSE on my laptop), but I agree that there's no way in hell I'd want to use YaST to work on multiple machines at once. And probably not even on my single machine if I spent much time fiddling with the configuration.

So yeah, if a company is expecting to sell products in a business setting where more than one computer is expected to be in use, a fully-featured CLI is absolutely essential.
