Taking it EZ

SQL Server may be reliable, but it still needs looking after. If funds don't stretch to a full-time administrator, try EZ Manage SQL

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There are two types of SQL Server machines – those with a full-time database administrator to look after them, fine-tune them, check the logs, optimise the indices, and generally keep them in tip-top condition. Then there are the rest of the servers, those that sit in smaller organisations, branch offices, or possibly forgotten in some department. The best such servers can hope for is a quick check when someone has a spare 10 minutes. The worst is that no-one looks at them until the users start ringing the helpdesk because the server has gone down.

Unfortunately for the servers, they are to an extent a victim of their own success. Microsoft has worked hard to make SQL Server reliable, and many organisations assume it will just keep chugging along. Spending money on full-time database administrators is a luxury and IT managers would prefer to use their hard-won funds elsewhere. This attitude is rather risky, though, because problems can build up slowly and get out of hand before the symptoms are problematic enough to have users call for help. Services can fail, disk space drop below sensible levels, response times degrade – and the system administrators remain blissfully unaware.

Keeping an eye on things

One solution to such circumstances is EZ Manage SQL from Future IT. This can be described as a software database administrator that will automatically take care of database maintenance tasks. It is designed to be usable by people without DBA skills, and the idea is that EZ Manage SQL ensures major problems don't creep up on you; instead, maintenance is carried out when it first becomes necessary. The way it works is that you select one or more databases to manage, you choose (and optionally modify) a set of maintenance rules saying how you want various administration tasks on the database to be managed, and you choose how you want to be notified if certain conditions occur. EZ Manage SQL then gets on with the everyday jobs of managing that database. From that point on, you can relax knowing that the database is being backed up, that the indices are being optimised and that the database will be shrunk to free unused space. You can also be sure that you'll be told if particular problems or potential problems occur.

When you first use EZ Manage SQL, you select a server to manage and EZ Manage SQL can then be used on the databases within that instance. You can choose to manage any or all of your databases. EZ Manage has a fast implementation option that will analyse all the databases you have selected and pick the most appropriate maintenance suite for each (**Figure 1**). The software offers a number of maintenance suites, each aimed at a particular type of database, including SAP Business One, SharePoint, Microsoft CRM and 'standard', which is the general default.

Maintenance suites define the rules used for server and database optimisation, database maintenance, normal backup, longer-term archiving, and monitoring and alerts. There's a Fast Implementation wizard that guides you through the choices for the maintenance suite, and you are also encouraged to complete details for e-mail notification so EZ Manage can alert you via e-mail if certain conditions occur.

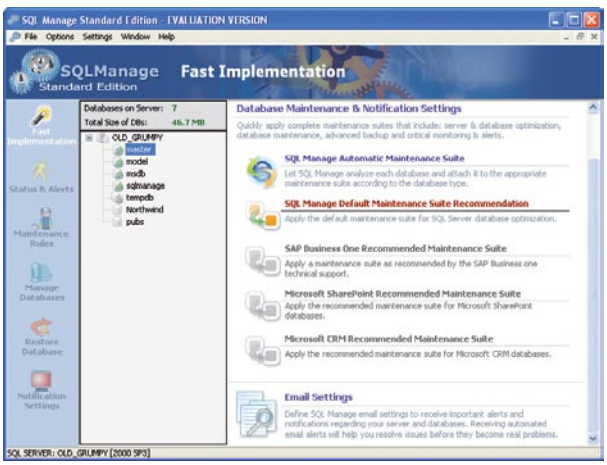

Figure 1: Using the Fast Implementation option to set default maintenance for a database

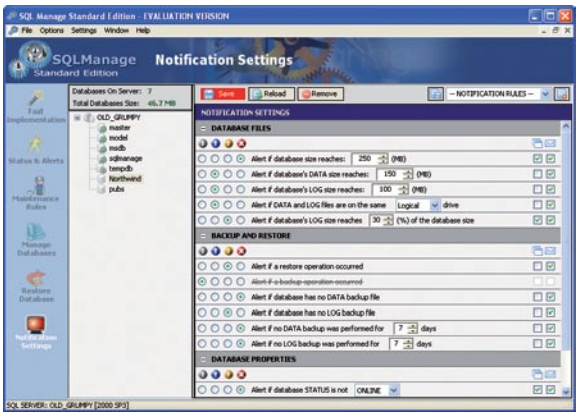

Figure 2: Setting notification options in SQL Manage

Once a database has been added to the list to be managed using EZ Manage, it has a set of maintenance rules associated with it that you can view and edit. The default rule set consists of administration properties, database backup and archiving, transaction log backup, index optimisation, shrinking the database and updating statistics. You could probably leave the defaults in place and just let EZ Manage get on with the task. However, you can edit the default behaviours or add your own rules. For example, the default backup rule says to back up the database daily at 23.30 with no end date, but you might not want to back up the database on Saturday and Sunday. Once a rule is attached to a database, it instructs the EZ Manage agent to create the appropriate SQL Server job that will execute the rule on the target server, and you can view the jobs that have been attached as a list of scheduled operations.

The backup feature also offers the option to compress the database, which can result in up to 95 per cent compression depending on the database structure and data, and to send the compressed backup files to a remote FTP server.

There's also a separate shrink option that you can use to recover free space from both the database and the log files. This can be set to run to a schedule so that your log files don't grow to the point where they become unmanageable.

Alert conditions

The notification settings section enables you to define the conditions on which you would be alerted (**Figure 2**). You can choose to be notified via an alert in the form of a pop-up on your monitor, or you can be e-mailed. By default, you'll be notified if a database is created or detached, if services are stopped, if memory or free disk space gets low, or if any job fails. If you choose to be alerted when a new database is created or attached to the server you are monitoring, you can also specify that the default maintenance rules will automatically be attached to it, and that the default notifications will also be set.

Another option in EZ Manage is a Status & Alerts page where you can view the complete list of the alerts that have been generated for a database based on the settings chosen in the Notification Settings section. This page has a tree view on the left with checkboxes that you can tick to show or hide various panels showing information about the server's logical drives, processor, services and memory. On the right-hand side of the page you see the alerts grouped into errors, information alerts and warnings, and you can see when the alert was issued, its category, whether it is relevant to a server or a database, and the name of the server or database to which the alert applies. If you double-click on an alert you can choose to delete it from the list. You can also view the users who are attached to a particular database, and choose to disconnect one or all of the users if necessary.

The final option in EZ Manage lets you restore a database from a backup, with choices for restoring from a particular backup file, from a specific time (point in time restore), or from an external source.

And that's not all…

In addition to the maintenance options described so far, EZ Manage has a number of other utilities and tools. You can run an SQL query, either by entering the SQL directly into the query window or by running queries that have previously been saved either within the database or by you from EZ Manage. You can carry out immediate actions such as disconnecting from a database, running a command shell, or clearing the SQL Server memory cache. This last choice is useful if you are alerted because the server memory is running low.

That's pretty much it. The software is very easy to use and understand. It covers all the major maintenance tasks that you need to worry about, and displays database performance details more clearly than the usual logs. You don't need to be a database expert to be able to use the software, but I can imagine hard-pressed database administrators would also find it handy as a way of saving time and still having the reassurance of knowing that their databases are receiving day-to-day management and maintenance. The software is available in a trial version, so why not check it out to see if it suits your purposes? <

System requirements

Operating system Windows 2000/XP or higher
Database software Microsoft SQL Server 2000/2005; MSDE
Hard disk space At least 50Mb
Processor P3 processor or above
Memory At least 128Mb

UK supplier

Future IT
Tel 020 7380 8178
E-mail info@futureitsoft.co.uk
Web www.futureitsoft.co.uk

Cost

£729 + VAT including first-year maintenance, which includes support and upgrades

Bottom line

Pros Very easy way to provide automatic database maintenance
Cons Might encourage you to ignore your servers too much