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Easy network access with Wicd

NETWORKED!

Mobile users change networks in rapid succession. Wicd quickly and conveniently manages the corresponding profiles. **BY JAN RÄHM**

Road warriors and users who use their notebooks in frequently changing environments make frequent use of their systems' network managers. Unfortunately, network managers are not in a software genus that typically lends itself to quick and easy use. Wicd [1] provides an alternative: The lean network manager offers a simple user interface that gives you everything you need to configure wired and wireless networks.

The Python-based program acts as a front end for various scripts. Originally, Wicd was developed as a replacement for the Ubuntu Network Manager, although support has been extended to other distributions. Wicd works well with alternative interfaces such as XFCE, IceWM, or Fluxbox. Thanks to its small footprint and frugal resource requirements, the tool feels at home on older, less powerful laptops. At the same time, Wicd supports a wide range of network cards [2] and encryption types.

Installing Wicd should not be too challenging, even for less experienced users. The tool feels at home in any working GTK + environment, and most distributions provide one out of the box. Although Wicd won't be found in every repository, it is easy to add and install.

Ubuntu users will discover an additional package directory for versions "Dapper" through "Hardy." To bind the repository, launch the Synaptic package manager in the panel below *System* and select *Settings | Package sources | Third party software | Add*; then add the line *deb http://apt.wicd.net Version extras*. Replace *Version* with the appropriate nickname – for example, *feisty* for Ubuntu 7.04. After updating the sources, Wicd should be easy to locate via

a package search and easy to set up. The same approach applies to Debian.

Arch Linux users will find pre-built Wicd packages in the Extra and Testing repositories. To install the network manager, simply issue the *pacman -Sy wicd* command. Slackware fans can download the program from the Slacky.eu [3] re-
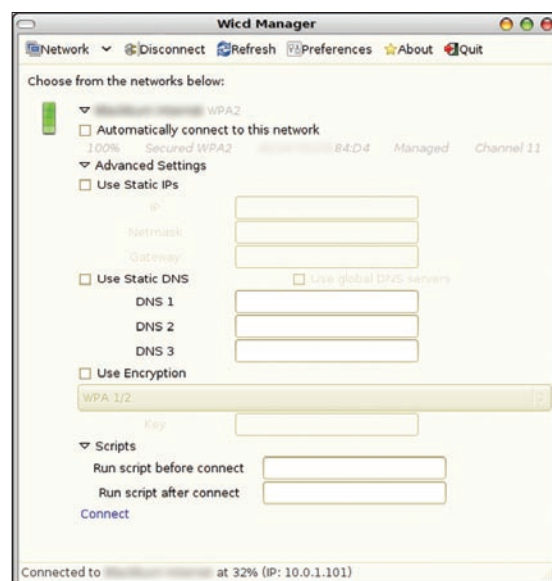
Figure 1: After launching, Wicd gives a neat overview of key information.

pository; after downloading it, use *installpkg Wicd-Version.tgz* to drop the tool onto your system. Fedora users will find an installation HOWTO in the Wicd wiki [4]. The Wicd source code packages are available from SourceForge [5].

To load Wicd automatically when you boot your system, add a call to */opt/wicd/tray.py* to your auto-start information. Depending on your system, your mileage will vary. On Ubuntu, select *System | Settings | Sessions | New* to add Wicd to the list of startup programs. Fluxbox users just need to open *~/.fluxbox/startup* in an editor and add the command line, followed by &, before *exec /usr/X11R6/bin/fluxbox*.

Once you have Wicd running, click the icon in the system tray to open the configuration dialog (Figure 1). The network manager shows the wired network and a list with visible wireless networks, including encryption information and signal strength. The status line (bottom of window) shows the current network status. Now you can connect your computer to a network. Wicd asks you for a profile for a wired connection. In the box, enter a name for the profile and then click *Add* to create it. This enables the blue *Connect*, which you can click to tell the computer to use DHCP and access the network.

Wicd has an *Advanced settings* option for more granular configuration. Here, you

can set up a static IP address and enter your choice of nameservers. Also, you can optionally specify *Scripts* that Wicd calls before or after establishing the connection. If you will be using the DNS server globally for all your connections, you can do this in *Settings* in the Wicd toolbox. Wicd offers further configuration options in this menu, such as the choice of driver for the WLAN card or profile settings.

If needed, Wicd will connect your computer to a WLAN that it has identified. To do this, click on *Connect*. For encrypted networks, this means entering the network key in *Advanced settings* before you do so. Wicd remembers the password and saves you the typical, often annoying, prompt at boot time.

Two further WLAN configuration options are hidden in the *Network* menu item: One lets you specify the ESSID for a hidden network, and the other lets you enter an ad hoc network with just a couple of mouse clicks.

Conclusions

Wicd is a lean and clear-cut network manager that will run on almost any system. The simple, self-explanatory configuration does not present hurdles to even the least experienced of users.

At the other end of the scale, Wicd offers experienced users a plethora of settings, making it the ideal alternative to more complex network managers. ■

INFO
[1]   Wicd: *http://wicd.net*
[2]   Tested hardware: *http://wicd.sourceforge.net/wiki/doku.php?id=testing*
[3]   Slackware 12.0 package: *http://repository.slacky.eu/slackware-12.0/network/wicd/*
[4]   Wicd on Fedora 7: *http://wicd.net/wiki/doku.php?id=fedora*
[5]   Wicd on SourceForge: *https://sourceforge.net/project/showfiles.php?group_id=194573*