

Review: ChristianSteven Software's SQL-RD

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Overview

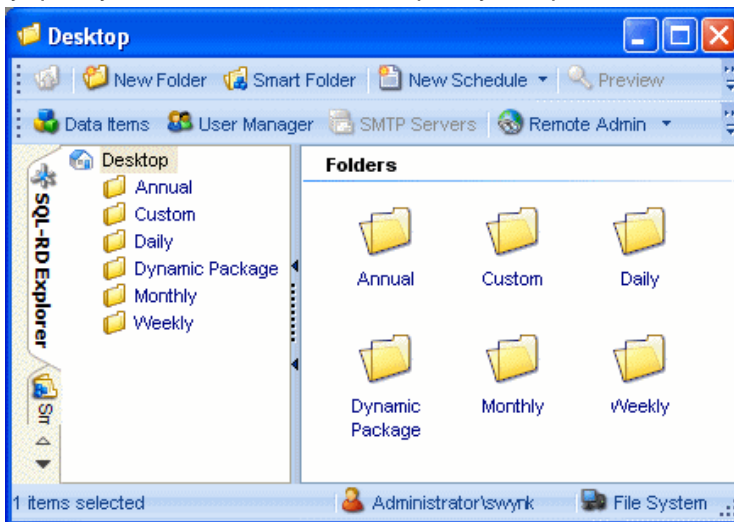
Building and deploying reports using Reporting Services is an interesting endeavor. Once you move beyond just setting up the report, getting it functioning like you want and getting results that give you information you need, you have to get that information out to your users. Reporting Services is more of a "Service Bureau" type application for a typical user. That is, you go to the portal, get the reports in the format you desire and you're all set. Scheduling distribution can be challenging and having more complex options like mass distribution or mixed formats (PDF, FTP, etc.) can make it even more so.

SQL-RD (**R**eports **D**istributor) is a tool to help you do what you need with your reports (and can be used as a scheduler for other things as well). SQL-RD lets you schedule reports at custom frequencies, selecting the format along the way (RTF, XLS, PDF, CSV, DOC and more). From here, you can email the reports, FTP them, print them to a printer or printers or even fax them, among other options. Essentially, SQL-RD exposes and enhances the Reporting Services distribution environment so you can get those reports where they need to be, automatically.

Deploying reports can get complex very quickly. SQL-RD takes that complexity and puts it in an environment that lets you manage and control your reporting systems, the output targets and report processing requirements.

With a single tool, you can oversee an entire reporting services environment - multiple servers, a huge array of reports and users, scheduling, output formats - and make sure you're getting the most out of your installation.

In this review, we look at how SQL-RD accomplishes this and what it could mean to your shop. If you're working with Reporting Services in a big way, SQL-RD can be a big help



in getting reports out - saving you time and energy in getting reports built and distributed to your users.

Installation/Activation

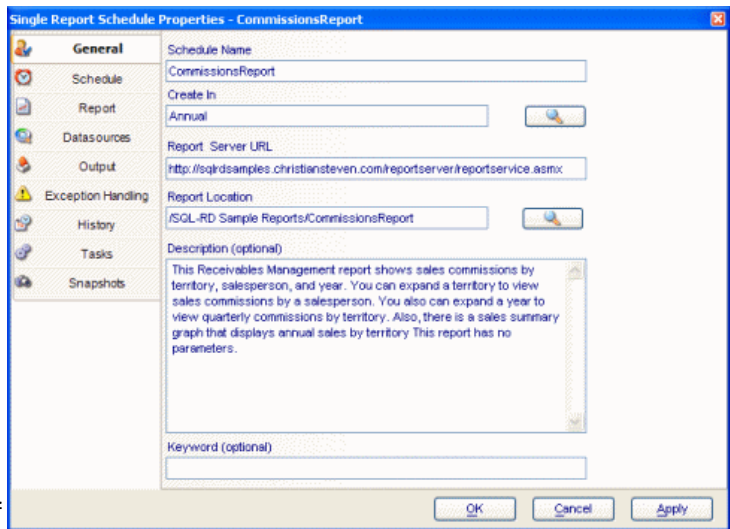
Installation of SQL-RD was not difficult, and runs through showing you the system requirements, setting up an administrative account and even your email, making sure all of the pieces work prior to getting into the product. Once you have SQL-RD set up, you'll be able to start working with it pretty quickly.

ChristianSteven has published some reports and made them available to you on the web so you can schedule them, access them, play with them to see how things work in SQL-RD. This was a nice touch and helped to visualize capabilities in the software.

Usage

SQL-RD does an excellent job of exposing the different properties and options you have when setting up a report automation task. Things like scheduling, parameters, handling errors (including accidental blank reports - very nice feature) are all included in the task setup.

In fact, when you're setting things up, you'll be surprised and amazed at all of the different options you have. They're broken out by sections of parameters - from scheduling to parameters to what happens to the report once it is run.



The output tab is the heart to the production capabilities of SQL-RD in this respect. A very powerful feature is that you can run a report and then have it output in mixed formats to multiple destinations. This is incredibly helpful and powerful and, by setting up your single task with your schedule as needed, the multiple destinations as needed and letting SQL-RD do the heavy lifting, you'll quickly see how this product can pay off in your shop. You can, of course, come back and edit the task once it's created - so as more people want to partake of your report, but one needs a PDF, one an Excel sheet, etc., you'll be able to simply come back in to the task, add them in and you'll be all set.

Once you create a report, or set of reports, you can create a Smart Folder to keep track of them, run reports as a batch review results, etc. The Smart Folders are managed by SQL-RD and let you get a handle on how you work with a large Reporting Services installation. You can also have the Smart Folders go out and gather up information based on criteria you set - things like report names, descriptions, keywords. If you've used Outlook's search folder technology - where you can create a search and then create a virtual folder where Outlook keeps track of new and existing items that match your search - this is essentially what Smart Folders are all about.

The control you gain in using a tool that presents all of these options is pretty amazing. You get a real feel for what can be done, beyond just writing and publishing your reports. Once you have

this understanding, you can provide a much more leveraged information source for your users.

When you're using RD, you'll come to appreciate the number of options you have available to you. These options range from the customizable calendars for scheduling to the fact that you can see the system status at any time by using the System Monitor options. You'll also be able to have ultimate control over your reports distribution, adding immediate value to the process of getting information out to the people that need it in the form that they need it delivered.

In our testing, the email options, the report production and the scheduling all worked very well.

One thing that was unusual was the great abundance of how-to videos available on their site. If you're stuck on how to best approach something, you can select the "How To...Demos" in the task pane and you'll be shown a menu of 35 (as of this writing) different topic areas with videos in each. Don't let the quantity worry you though - the tasks are well defined, with each video being short and to the point.

Conclusion

I think SQL-RD has some outstanding benefits. You'll need to take some time getting used to the different options and getting your arms around how the things work, but the leverage that it provides for a Reporting Services installation can be incredible. If you find yourself babysitting your Reporting Services systems, making sure things are happening, sending out reports, reminding users to go get their information, etc., you want to install and test SQL-RD in your environment. It'll potentially save you a good number of hours, lots of grief and, at the same time, give you happier users.

Ratings

Here are the ratings and brief commentary for the product.

Overall Rating: ★★★★★ (4.9 stars)

Installation ★★★★★ (4.5 stars)

The videos for getting started are a great help.

Usage ★★★★★ (5 stars)

Lots of online help locally, with additional information on the web site.

Support ★★★★★ (5 stars)

Support was very responsive and helpful in the contacts we had with them.

Real-World Usefulness ★★★★★ (5 stars)

If you have a well-used Reporting Services installation, there's no question SQL-RD could be a great help in automating the reports and providing a solid management environment to watch over and maintain your reports.

On the web: <http://www.ChristianSteven.com>

Trial available? Yes.

Stephen Wynkoop is the founder of SSWUG.ORG (www.sswug.org) and a Microsoft SQL Server MVP. He writes a daily column on the database industry for SSWUG and is also host of a weekly podcast on the site. He's also a frequent presenter at conferences and produces webcasts several time monthly for SSWUG. He can be reached at swynk@sswug.org.