

System Center Service Manager Beta 1 – 1st Look

A brief review of Microsoft's new IT service
management platform

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Contents

Introduction 3

Features and Functionality 3

 User Interfaces 3

 Incident Management 5

 Change Management 5

 Asset Management..... 5

 Reporting 6

Installing Service Manager..... 6

 Hardware Sizing Recommendations:..... 6

 Lab specifications: 6

 Launching the Console..... 9

Conclusion..... 9

Introduction

System Center Service Manager Beta 1 clearly aims to deliver more than just a run-of-the-mill helpdesk ticketing system, but a comprehensive solution for IT operations management. In fact, the ITIL concepts directly or indirectly referenced throughout are enough to make the MOF-averse stand up and take notice. In this article, I will share my preliminary observations related to product functionality in the Beta 1 release and a few of the marquee features, and follow that up with a quick installation walkthrough. With the ink still wet on the Service Manger Beta 1 documentation, my focus at this point is simply to educate by sharing some information and initial impressions of the new platform.

NOTE: For those unfamiliar with the IT Infrastructure Library (ITIL), I'll also provide some links throughout this article to some quick definitions and additional reading on the topic.

It is clear that MS intends to capitalize on their native advantages in the integration department, providing connectors to Active Directory user data and hardware / software asset data housed in SMS 2003. My first impression of the product is that it is pretty big, and by big I mean physically. As you'll read in a minute, the hardware requirements and software prerequisites are substantial. And I don't say that to knock the product. We all know there is no such thing as a free lunch. With functionality often comes a certain amount of complexity by necessity.

While mid-market enterprise shopping for a helpdesk solution may be put off by the infrastructure requirements, I think this product will play well in the enterprise space in a field littered with players that lack tight and easily implemented integration with systems management platforms. The reporting engine, based on SQL 2005 Reporting Services, is also going fair well against the competition. The degree to which all this will spur enterprises to shun best-of-breed solutions in favor of easy integration and the promise of data convergence will be interesting to witness.

Features and Functionality

Service Manager directly or indirectly supports a number of ITIL disciplines, including Incident Management, Change Management, Asset Management, and Problem Management (and a few others not mentioned here). Let's step through the major components.

User Interfaces

The **Service Manager Console** is the user interface that allows users to access the features of Service Manager. Additionally, Service Manager includes a **Self-Service Portal** which provides a web interface to help end users help themselves through knowledge base searches for common problems, troubleshooting issues, as well as to create help requests to get assistance from Help Desk personnel, reducing the overall support burden of the [Service Desk](#).

You'll notice in the screen shot below the workspace buttons corresponding to specific areas of functionality, building on this common theme as delivered in the previously released System Center products, like Operations Manager and Essentials 2007.

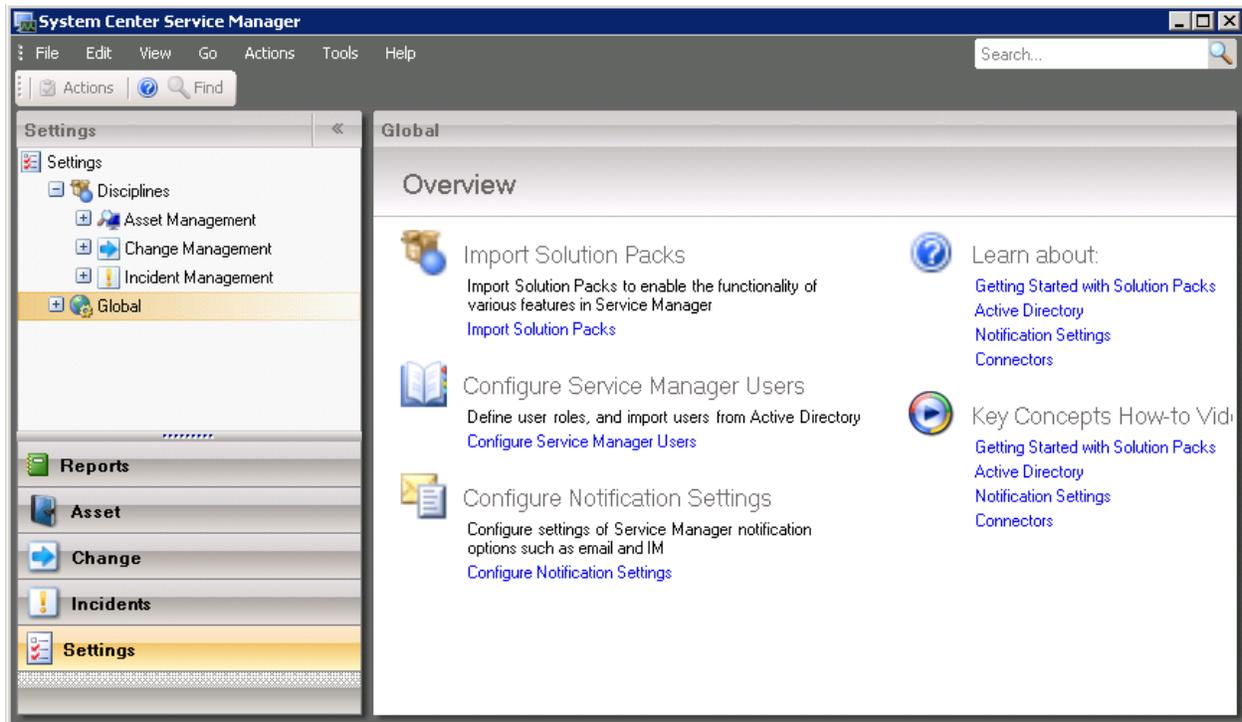


Figure 1 - The Service Manager Console

The Self-Service Portal uses Office SharePoint Server 2007, which allows users to customize the interface to suit their preferences. This feature requires Active Directory users to be imported via the **Active Directory Connector Wizard** in the Service Manager console. Users imported from Active Directory are automatically configured with the necessary administrative rights. Conveniently, the wizard offers a scheduling feature, allowing daily or weekly import of users from the target Active Directory.

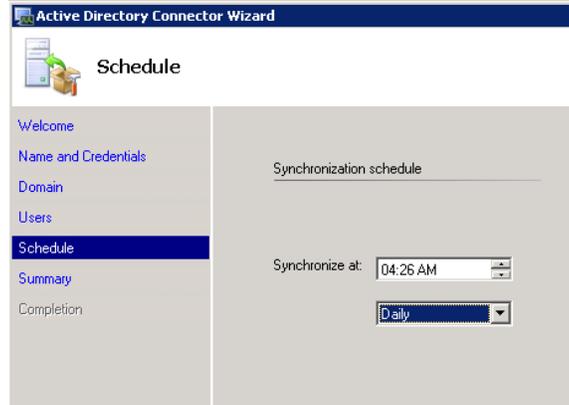


Figure 2 - Active Directory Connection Wizard

Incident Management

The [Incident Management](#) feature provides maintaining of detailed records and monitoring of incidents reported by end users. IT support analysts can record the details of incidents reported by end users by phone. The Self-Serve Portal also allows users to submit incidents directly without calling the Helpdesk.

The default **New Portal Incident Notification** rule, which defined the behavior of new service requests logged via the Self-Serve Portal. Additional rules can be created to customize this behavior to suit the organization.

Change Management

The [Change Management](#) feature in Service Manager, you can submit change requests for hardware and software assets within your organization. Customizable workflow provides some automation to the approval process (the Change Management feature requires users, assets and e-mail notification be configured prior to first use).

Change requests can be linked to specific assets, incidents logged in the system, as well as other change requests, lending support to the [Problem Management](#) process in the given environment. As the associated items are updated in the process of change and incident management, the affected linked items are automatically updated. And by accommodating the relationships in this automated way, the product delivers a self-maintaining [Configuration Management Database](#) (CMDB); at least to the degree these links are utilized to establish the requisite relationships.

This addresses a belief I have long held, which is that processes automated to the greatest degree practical are the most likely to be successfully implemented in the long term. This linking feature addresses a key aspect of Configuration Management, which is keeping the CMDB up to date.

Asset Management

The [Asset Management](#) feature Service Manager categorizes assets in one of three categories: system, hardware and software. If Systems Management Server 2003 SP3 is installed in your environment, asset data can be imported automatically. For those lacking SMS, assets can be entered manually. Service

manager actually maintains a catalog of the various asset types (roughly corresponding to the Definitive Software Library and Hardware Store defined by ITIL). The process flow controlling asset entry into the catalog can be controlled and customized by the IT organization via the Asset Management solution pack.

Microsoft InfoPath can be used to author custom **form templates** for any of the aforementioned disciplines, easing the task of customization to the target environment.

Reporting

Service Manager includes a reporting feature including a data warehouse, with a small number of reports in beta 1 corresponding to the Incident, Change and Asset management features central to the product. It will be interesting to learn over time what integration will be provided to incorporate warehouse data from other System Center products. Reports in my lab took longer to render than I was willing to wait in my initial tour through the product. No doubt a dedicated data warehouse would resolve that issue.

Installing Service Manager

Hardware Sizing Recommendations:

Read these carefully in the beta documentation, as the hardware requirements are substantial – this is not a small app when all prerequisites are considered. Meeting the recommended 4 GB of RAM is definitely recommended, as well as dedicated couple of physical disks. In this trial in a very sizable virtual lab environment, additional hardware resources were provisioned after installation to bring application performance to a reasonable level.

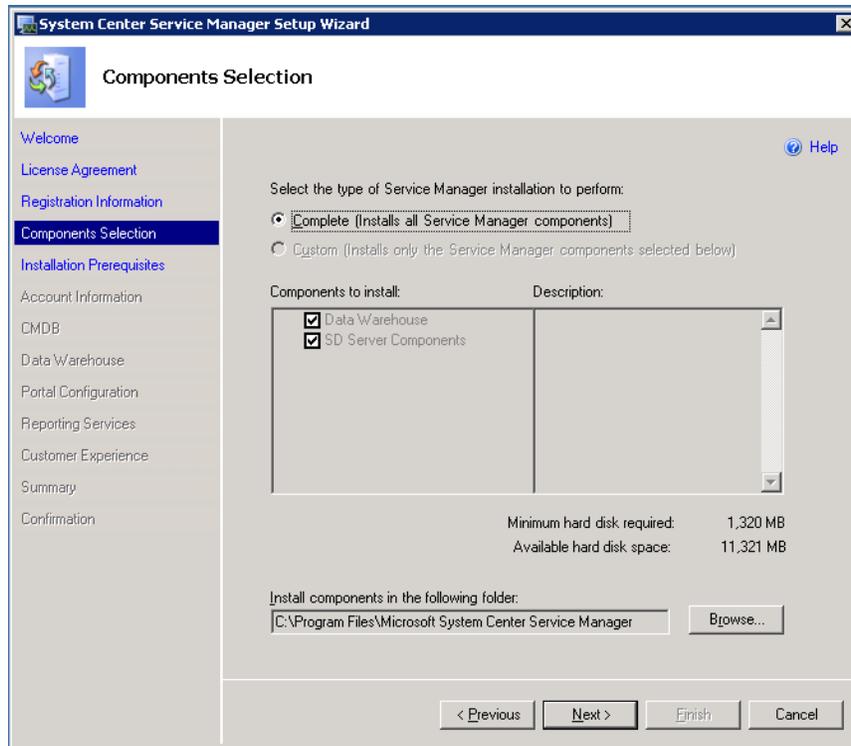
Lab specifications:

The lab environment was purposefully configured with a disjointed DNS namespace to determine if the application was susceptible to the same issues encountered in Operations Manager and Essentials reporting components. To the credit of the design team, Service Manager had no trouble with the domain namespace.

Server: TM_W2K3E_APP-S

AD Domain: momresources.org (NetBIOS: PETE)

1. On the **Components Selection** screen, complete install is the only option I was given. This is certainly just a beta 1 limitation. Distributed installations should be supported in later releases. You can choose the volume where the application binaries will be installed.

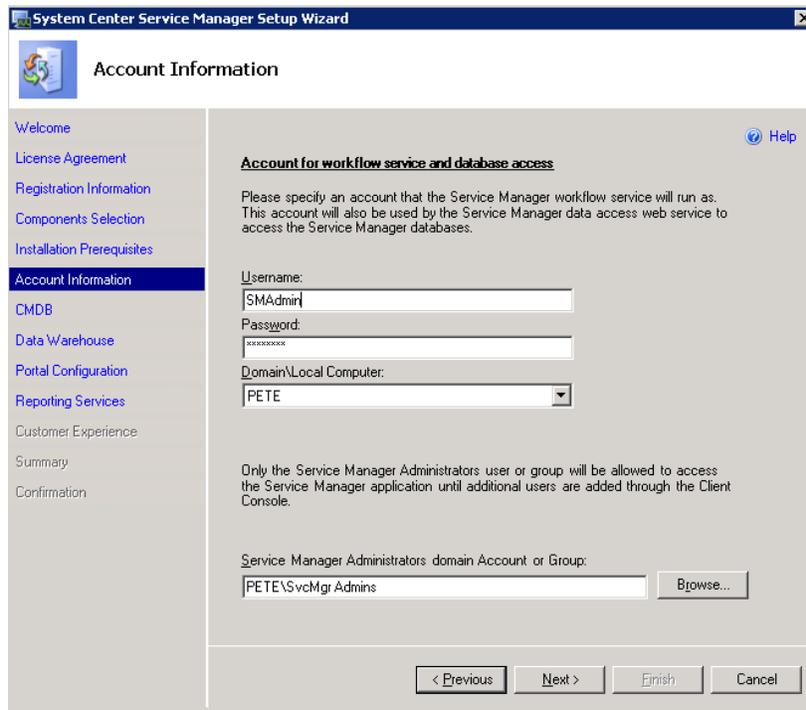


2. The next screen presents system compliance to application prerequisites. The list of prerequisites is quite lengthy and including the following:

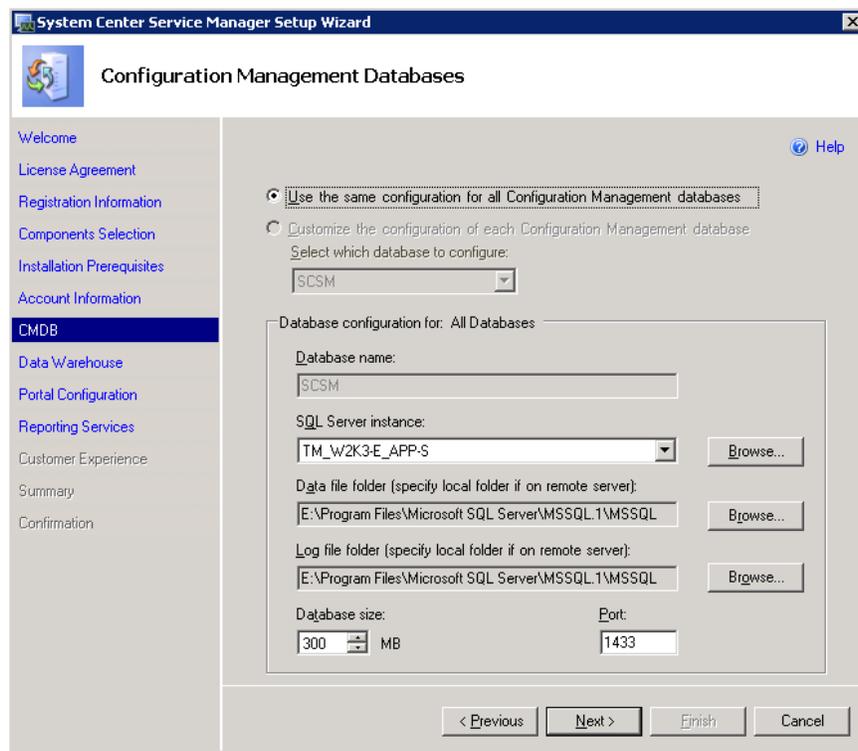
- Office SharePoint Server (MOSS) 2007 Enterprise
- SQL 2005 and SRS with SP2
- .NET 2.0 and 3.0 Frameworks
- IIS 6.0

WARNING: When the SharePoint install was complete, the default website containing the SQL Reporting Services instance would no longer render due to a conflict with a default SharePoint site labeled 'SharePoint – 80'. I bumped the 'SharePoint – 80' site to a high port and then started the default website successfully.

3. On the **Account Information** screen, provide a domain user account with administrative rights on the Service Manager server. This account does not require Domain Admin permissions.
4. Additionally, provide a domain group for provisioning administrative access to Service Manager for additional users.



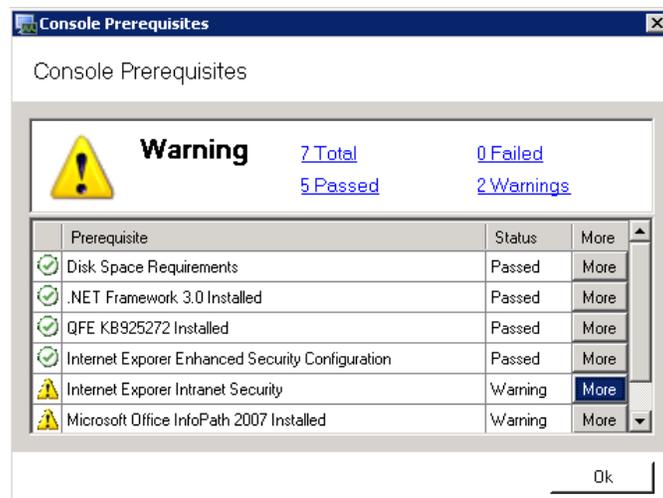
5. On the **Configuration Management Databases** screen, select the SQL instance that will be used to host all Service Manager databases. As seen in the screenshot below, some configuration options are unavailable in the beta.



6. On the **Data Warehouse Databases** screen, similar options and restrictions in database configuration are presented. Assuming you have only one SQL instance on this server, simply click next on this screen for testing purposes.
7. On the **Portal Configuration** screen, accept the default Self Service Portal port number of 50000.
8. The **Reporting Services** screen appeared to auto-detect my SQL Reporting Services instance, and provided a dropdown for selection, preventing and data entry errors on my part.
9. On the **Customer Experience** screen, accepting feedback sent to Microsoft was mandatory (selected and grayed out). Presumably, this is another temporary restriction during the beta.
10. On the **Summary** screen, review your selections for issues and click **Install**. When the installation is complete, click **Finish**

Launching the Console

Launching the Analyst Console brings with it a whole new set of requirements. In fact, I could not launch the console and expect full functionality out of the box, as I was greeted by a new set of prerequisites. In particular, InfoPath 2007 is required for editing forms. True to the console prerequisite warnings, I had to adjust my Internet Explorer Intranet security settings on the server to a less secure level before the console would open successfully.



After passing the prerequisites, the user is prompted to select the desired Service Manager server. Accepting the default here resulted in a successful connection.

Conclusion

I hope you've found this first look at System Center Service Manager beneficial. Your feedback is always welcome at <http://www.systemcenterforum.org/contact>.