A measure of experience

Delivering a high quality user experience is arguably the network’s most important role, and it demands an empirical approach.

“For the user, the experience is everything,” wrote IT analyst group QuoCirca in a recent report on user experience monitoring. “The experience users receive when accessing IT applications is critical to the effectiveness of many business processes.”

Those comments establish what is at stake in managing the network to ensure user experience – the ability of employees to do their job, and for the organisation to fulfil its business processes. For this reason, end-user experience should be the metric by which network management is measured, and the basis on which investments in network management should be justified. And to guarantee that the network is doing the job that is required of it, user experience should be measured and managed explicitly.

The value of the user’s experience consists of a number of factors. Firstly, network downtime, when a network is altogether unavailable, obviously impairs employee productivity by preventing them from accessing business systems. Degradation of network performance can have the same effect, either by slowing employees down or by rendering business applications entirely unusable.

The economic impact of these end-user experience impairments will depend on the nature of the business, but common issues include reduced sales when salespeople cannot transact deals and an increased burden on the IT support function.

Other adverse effects of poor user experience can be more abstract, but no less real. For example, unresponsive systems can be stressful for employees. They can also cause loss of reputation, especially if they are customer-facing systems.

METHODS OF MEASUREMENT

What is not measured cannot be managed, and maintaining user experience demands statistical measurement.

One way to do this is through infrastructure level monitoring. This simply measures the response times between network components – the server, the client and the nodes of the network in between. This allows the organisation to detect not only when user experience issues occur, but also where in the network they originate.

Another method is to simulate user transactions. For an e-commerce site, for example, a system would simulate user behaviour, measuring response times and website performance as it goes along.

A third, more technically complex, approach is to place markers in application transactions. This allows the flow of packets related to a given application to be traced through the network, highlighting application-specific bottlenecks. It is a technique that requires certain software development skills, but it can be used to monitor the performance of not only the network but also the application servers themselves. (What at first appear to be network-related issues may in fact be application problems.)

A fourth way is to track end-user perception, whether by analysing calls to the support desk or through surveys. This is an important component of IT service management and many organisations will have this capability in place already.

However, end-user perception is a lagging indicator of network performance, and is of limited value when it comes to diagnosing problems. Taking a proactive approach saves time and money. A recent study by analyst company the Aberdeen Group found that sophisticated adopters of end-user experience monitoring identified 53% of application issues before there was a user complaint, compared with 39% among average companies.

In the past, IT or network managers may have felt that they knew their networks well enough not to need a system that tells them when something is going wrong. But in the client-server era, the flow of traffic through the network was predictable. Today, virtual environments and mobile devices make traffic flows highly unpredictable, meaning that an empirical approach to user experience management is essential.

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