Your Starting Point for IT Optimization

Refreshing your IT operations can only begin after you get visibility into what your infrastructure is up to.

Brandon Shopp
Vice President, Product Strategy for Security, Compliance and Tools, SolarWinds

WHEN THE PANDEMIC CHANGED EDUCATION, the members of THWACK®, the SolarWinds IT community, did what they do best: reached out to help others. In many cases, that meant sharing examples of what came to be known as "crisis dashboards": compilations of the data they had put together to monitor the new work-from-home/study-from-home experiments that had landed on every college and university in the world.

While the dashboards would be unique from campus to campus, they also had something in common: Each was intended to give IT professionals the immediate visibility they suddenly needed into various aspects of their infrastructure, to stay on top of operations for their higher ed environments. That might be data about the number of concurrent VPN sessions and VPN bandwidth usage, the average and peak loads on the CPU and memory loads, demand on core networking hardware, counts of concurrent users for critical applications, or any number of other specific details important for the institution doing the monitoring.

This information became essential for adapting quickly to changing conditions on the ground and allowing IT organizations to be proactive. Rather than waiting for a complaint from a college executive or fielding a flood of student support calls, these schools could shift into gear and take the measures to set them up for friction-free usage, prevent outages and help them be ready for whatever came next.

Gaining a clear view into data center details is the starting point for any IT optimization process.

Visibility that Evolves with Needs

Monitoring all the moving parts of the data center doesn't have to be complicated. The right kind of monitoring tools should be:

- Simple enough for non-specialists in the IT organization to use without a lot of training.
- Modular, so usage can grow as needed.
- All-encompassing, so users don't have to work with a bunch of different management products – just one, since that simplifies the work.

For example, the modules in the SolarWinds® **Orion® Platform** products address performance of every element in the IT stack through an interface designed to consolidate data from whatever sources are most important to you, whether that be network servers and applications, virtualization, NetFlow traffic, security and compliance, storage, IP address tracking, VoIP and WAN, devices and port usage, websites and databases, and patch management. The Orion Platform serves, as one user put it, as an "EKG" for your systems.

After the recent SUNBURST attack, SolarWinds has taken significant measures to further secure its internal environment and to enhance its product development environment to help ensure the security and integrity of its software.

Setting Up for Long-Term Success...

The university IT shop doesn't typically head to Best Buy when it's time to update infrastructure. Acquisitions have to go through internal planning and approval, budgeting and ordering – and it all takes time. Having visibility into usage trends enables the IT department to better plan, thereby preventing gaps in performance and operations and opening up ample time to line up the funding needed.

Best-of-breed monitoring takes that a step further, pulling in information from outside sources, so the IT crew doesn't have to wonder. SolarWinds **Network Configuration Manager**, for example, links up with the relevant hardware and software to notify you when a vendor has put an end-of-support notice out. If Cisco has issued an end-of-of life message for a given switch, it serves as an early indicator for you to help plan timing of replacement.

...While Dealing with the Immediate Hazards of the Job

When a student or staffer is complaining about performance, IT has to establish the source of the issue. Two years ago, it might have been a lack of WiFi in a particular area on campus or a faltering virtual machine. Now it might be figuring out whether that laggy web session is a problem with Zoom or a snafu with the on-premise learning management system. Being able to focus just on those pieces of infrastructure seeing the greatest pressure makes response more efficient and effective.

That was the idea with the crisis dashboards – to bring clarity to decision-making. But the same solution can also help steer IT's larger journey.

As we all know, the IT roadmaps of 12 or 18 months ago have undergone drastic alteration. College and university leaders have had to re-examine what their organizations are going to look like going forward. Priorities have shifted, and in plenty of schools, those long-awaited digital transformations have moved from nice-to-have to must-have. Getting visibility is your first step forward for going in new directions.

Brandon Shopp *is the vice president of product strategy for security, compliance and tools at SolarWinds.*

4 TRIED-AND-TRUE SUGGESTIONS

Talk with others in your community. You'll get a lot of useful insight, advice, and feedback from your peers. Find out what they like and don't like about the various technologies you're considering. They're sure to be candid.

Follow up on vendor references. Make sure the ones you receive are equivalent to your school, by virtue of segment, size or IT structure.

Ask how many full-time employees will be required to run the application once it's deployed. After all, any commitment you make to this solution will suck time and resources away from other work on the IT roadmap.

Put the solution to the test. If it requires a set of professional services or a sales engineer to come on site – whether physically or virtually – to get the system configured and running, is it going to be sustainable once you're holding the keys?