How I Outgrew Nagios

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whitepaper

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I wanted to hide under my desk and cry in frustration after learning I had to start a new project to build a centralized dashboard to track performance metrics and generate alerts for our new 24x7 ITIL-driven support center. Over the years, my division had accumulated half a dozen different commercial and open-source products for monitoring our applications, systems, and the network. Each one promised to deliver a centralized solution, with both ease of use and deployment. In the end, they didn't deliver as promised. It wasn't easy to make them work after all, as they needed hundreds of hours of configuration, tuning and client-side software.

Like most organizations, we had installations of various open-source products such as Nagios and MRTG, which had served us well in the past when we had simpler requirements for monitoring and no need for advanced alerting or performance metrics, but MRTG didn't go far enough to do everything and Nagios got complicated. Nagios grew modules, add-ons, and software dependencies, all of which had little documentation and assumed the customer was a Linux expert instead of Network Management expert. There were few people in the organization who had the patience or esoteric knowledge to develop the necessary modules for delivering the enhanced functionality we need from these open-source tools.

As a result, we purchased some very expensive commercial products to overcome the limitations of our open-source solutions. They were supposed to integrate with our existing tools, providing an easy transition to an application more suited for our increasingly complex environment. Instead, we usually ended up with a product just as difficult to implement and modify as the open-source solution. Additionally, after the professional services money for implementation ran out, we had the same limited functionality and managerial frustration.

Ultimately, we stayed with Nagios because we couldn't find anything better. We didn't have dedicated staff to focus solely on configuring and customizing these monitoring applications, nor did we have the budget for a large annual support contract on expensive products we never fully deployed. It became a case of "the software devil you know is better than the one you don't."

So what's a conscientious network or systems administrator to do? All we wanted was visibility into what was happening in our data center so we could predict problems with some level of certainty regarding the cause, instead of constantly scratching our heads in confusion when a critical application failed. We needed better tools to react to problems as well. We kept asking our vendors, "Why does this have to be so hard?"

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A Vendor Who Gets IT:

While performance and application monitoring can be a challenge given today's highly intricate environments, it doesn't have to result in failure like it did for me. For many organizations, SolarWinds Server & Application Monitor (SAM) answers these problems while still delivering a flexible, powerful, enterprise-ready solution.

SolarWinds SAM offered us the best of both open-source and commercial worlds. The core SAM software is a supported, well-documented commercial product with out-of-the-box functionality. It also has a lot of custom monitors that users developed themselves at SolarWinds' online community site, thwack. And because it is managed by and geared toward engineers, thwack is a vibrant, growing community of more than 65,000 IT pros who share a passion for technology. While SolarWinds provides plenty of pre-built monitoring templates and reports, SAM has the versatility of customization, and thwack allows for the sharing and exchange of content between members. When I have an issue, I can look to thwack to find someone who has had a similar problem and can help with a solution. I don't have to give up the flexibility of open-source just because I'm using a commercial product.

SolarWinds SAM supports multiple platforms and protocols, including WMI, the VMware API and SNMP, so I no longer had to maintain separate solutions for monitoring the network and systems. I also didn't have to install and configure complex plugins to get the Windows and VMware integration I needed or rely on open source plugins on closed platforms, which never did work quite right or reliably.

SolarWinds SAM is mobile-ready and can detect if I'm viewing the dashboard with an Android, Blackberry or iPhone. Although your mobile phone isn't a computer, there are times when checking your network status on your phone is vital to having a personal life and getting away from your laptop.

It's common wisdom among IT professionals that performance monitoring tools are hard to deploy. That said, who needs to worry about the installation, maintenance and constant upgrade of agents? I found that with SolarWinds SAM there are no more compatibility issues and I don't worry about the monitoring going haywire every time someone upgrades a system or application. With auto-discovery of applications and even integration with Nagios installations by utilizing my existing scripts, it didn't feel like a forklift to add SolarWinds SAM to my environment.

SolarWinds is more affordable than offerings from the big vendors, and quicker to install — an hour for the software and less than a day with basic configuration on some devices. It was much easier to get buy-in from management because of the rapid results; the cost didn't require justification for a huge procurement. In fact, my boss kept asking me if I was sure the quote was correct.

I used to feel married to my Nagios box because it woke me up in the middle of the night so many times over the years. Sometimes I spent hours just trying to figure out why an alert was generated. Now I only hear from my SAM when something that I define is "wrong with a system" because the intelligent tools that minimize the number of false status messages reduce the false positives and message floods. I have my life back!

Conclusion: Server and Application Monitoring Doesn't Have to be Rocket Science

With SolarWinds SAM we have the best of both worlds: ease of use and flexibility. It integrated seamlessly with our existing Nagios scripts while meeting the requirements for our new support center. I also no longer dread the chore of configuring monitoring when deploying a new system or application. Ultimately, the successful outcome in choosing and deploying an application monitoring solution hinges on finding the right combination of usability, functionality, and ease of deployment for your environment. Without considering the importance of each, you could end up with another useless tool gathering dust, just like we did. I no longer feel chained to my desk, worried that I'll miss an important piece of information critical to the care and feeding of our enterprise.

About the Author

Mrs. Y has recently entered the service provider world as a senior network security engineer after more than a decade in EDU and almost 15 years of IT experience. In her free time, she blogs and contributes to podcasts for Packet Pushers. She has managed systems with all types of operating systems as well as network devices and security appliances. She also likes long walks in hubsites, traveling to security conferences, and spending extended hours in the Bat Cave. She sincerely believes that every problem can be solved with a "for" loop.

About SolarWinds for Sysadmins

SolarWinds, a leading provider of IT management software to more than 100,000 customers worldwide, now offers a more comprehensive suite of highly regarded, highly effective products for sysadmins in organizations of all sizes.

SolarWinds systems management portfolio includes simple and affordable solutions for sysadmins, including:

- Patch Manager automates patching applications across tens of thousands of servers and workstations; notifies sysadmins of Microsoft Windows and third-party patches from Adobe, Apple, and Google.

- DameWare NT Utilities (DNTU) provides an integrated collection of Microsoft Windows administration utilities within a centralized interface for remote management of Windows servers, workstations, desktops, and laptops.

- DameWare Mini Remote Control (MRC) delivers one of the most comprehensive feature sets for Windows remote management in the industry with a price point at $99, that makes it one of the most affordable as well.

- Server & Application Monitor (SAM), a comprehensive server and application management product that enables sysadmins to monitor Windows, Unix, and Linux servers with visibility into the performance of critical IT services, underlying application components, and operating system and server resources on which they run.

- Synthetic End User Monitor (SeUM) delivers affordable, cloud-based, and internal web application monitoring, as well as external website monitoring, allowing users to respond to problems proactively.

SolarWinds strives to provide sysadmins with the tools they need to get their jobs done faster and easier, at a price they can afford.

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