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Knowledge Is Power

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The Challenges of Proactive Support:
Q & A with NextNine CEO

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Q: What value do remote monitoring and proactive support offer IP Communication service providers that mainstream solutions do not?

A: *Unlike mainstream, reactive methodologies, proactive, remote, support automation solutions perform scheduled preventive monitoring and maintenance that avert downtime and prevent problems from impacting service – even before customers identify initial problem symptoms. This approach ensures that resolution is initiated at an earlier stage in the problem cycle, resulting in lower mean time to repair (MTTR) and maximum system availability.*

In addition, remote diagnostic tools are designed to monitor and analyze telephony networks, providing support engineers with a consistent, timely view of all problems identified by diagnostics routines in all devices/applications being monitored. The result: dramatically accelerated problem prevention and resolution, as well as maximum system uptime.

Q: With consumer demand for converged communications applications on the rise, and the complexity inherent in the underlying architecture, such as IP Multimedia Subsystem (IMS), what additional considerations must telcos take into account when considering remote monitoring and proactive support?

A: *There are two primary issues that must be addressed: security and knowledge effectiveness. Converged communications clearly represent the future of telecommunications. As such, no matter what IP-based communications methodology you're talking about, first and foremost on everyone's mind must be security. All remote access traffic must be encrypted over the Internet, regardless of the type of access used. Several successful implementations of which I am aware use only port 443, SSL-based, outbound only communication, even for remote access sessions, file transfers and all other remote workflows, creating an ultra-secure, customer-accepted operating environment.*

The complexity of converged communications solutions holds a major risk when it comes to monitoring, such as the inherent danger of flooding the monitoring organization with huge number of false alarms. Traditional approaches to monitoring are based on receiving all alarms and related data available from the system's various units at the device level, then subsequently correlating this flow into meaningful alarms.

The problem is that with the increased complexity of these systems, correlation is almost impossible, rendering much 'application level' monitoring unusable.

A different approach is to start from the problem level, using post-deployment knowledge to learn what are the most critical problems, and how they can be avoided.

By monitoring for specific system-wide problems, the number of alarms generated can be reduced to the minimum level required to maintain high availability, without creating an enormous amount of 'noise'. Also of note, is that this approach requires tools that use agent-less monitoring, and enable rapid deployment of new knowledge when it is manifested in the field.

Q: What would you consider the top three requirements of any support implementation?

A: *One of the key factors that come into play is 80/20 rule, which refers to the fact that 80% of critical network problems are generated by 20% of causes. These 20%, therefore, represent the highest priority issues that must be prevented to avoid outages – a major source of customer angst, not to mention SLA penalties. Support automation solutions must identify these critical issues and find a resolution within the first few days of implementation.*

Converged communication environments are evolving rapidly, forcing vendors to 'learn as they go' how to service and maintain the systems. To achieve successful implementations, it is critical for support automation solutions to be flexible.

Fast adaptability to changes and the ability to identify and resolve specific problems is imperative, while flexibility is arguably also one of the most important considerations amongst vendors and their customers; its impact being felt throughout the life of the a customer relationship.

Finally, I would say that a strong support implementation should provide vendors and their customers with ease-of-use. Support automation makes many support tasks fast and error free. One-to-many software and patch distribution, trouble shooting routines, automatic report generation etc., are just some of the tasks that drive an implementation towards higher levels of customer satisfaction. Furthermore, support automation enables vendors to better understand their customers' needs and deliver solutions accordingly.

Q: Are there any implementation woes or 'growing pains' that accompany new support implementations?

A: *The biggest hurdle that organizations face when implementing a Support Automation system is changing the mentality of its team. Support Automation is proactive in nature, and requires a change in thinking as the support team's mentality is now proactive/preventive in nature, as opposed to reactive (responding to customer complaints). Further, while the reduction in labor expenditure and service costs result in increasing effectiveness and generate more revenue resulting from higher profit margins associated with SLAs, sometimes, quite frankly, accepting the transition to automated support takes times.*

Q: In your experience, what are the most common factors that cause a support implementation to fail?

A: Time and time again, we see support departments trying to stretch their limited human capital too thin; they unsuccessfully try to monitor a literal sea of data with inadequate headcount and resources, and inevitably pay the price in terms of unhappy customers and lost revenue – a problem you don't see with support automation.

Another impediment worth mentioning – particularly relevant when discussing remote monitoring – is the trust barrier between the support provider and their customer, the service provider. Support automation addresses the sometimes "sticky situation" of when customers demand full visibility and control. True support automation solutions enable vendors to deliver transparency and ensures that service providers are in control – practices that are unmatched by reactive support methods.

Lastly, automating preventive maintenance is not a high enough priority for several IT vendors. In addition to the obvious benefits, automating preventive maintenance ensures higher systems performance, less issues to deal with over time, and lower TCO, thereby increasing customer satisfaction and by extension, customer retention, in addition to protecting service maintenance revenue and increasing profit margins.

Q: Is there ever a situation where investment in proactive support distracts from other areas of service?

A: *I don't think that 'distracts' is the right word, as it implies a slightly negative connotation. With Support Automation, there is a noticeable shift in where an organization spends its capital. While implementing a new support infrastructure will occupy funds previously spent elsewhere, the resulting increased customer experience and optimization of manpower more than makes up for the required investment.*

Q: Can you point to any successful, current implementations, and highlight any resulting ROI?

A*: There are several forward-thinking organizations that are using remote monitoring and proactive support today. From healthcare to finance, telecom, executives agree that the customer is king (that sentiment was a very large theme at this year's TelecomNEXT). In fact, recent research suggests that a 1% increase in customer satisfaction results in a 2.75% increase in shareholder value. As such, network uptime, reliable, prompt and effective technical support have never mattered more.*

Comverse, a unit of Comverse Technology, Inc., developed a proactive support solution to provide its customers with maximum system availability and service. This proactive approach to monitoring, maintenance and self-healing has allowed Comverse to better address the complex needs of its telecom operator clients, increasing customer satisfaction and efficiency while reducing service and support costs. For the certain systems in which Comverse leverages remote monitoring and proactive support, they have improved their service and support by 25%, quarter over quarter, as well as substantially increased uptime.

Another example of an organization implementing successful support automation is airwide solutions. To further differentiate itself in this competitive market, airwide concluded it must provide its customers with an end-to-end managed service support solution that featured 24x7 monitoring, configuration management and maintenance. By providing such a service, airwide realized it could relieve customers' management burden as well as offer higher increased system availability.

The solution that airwide implemented proactively and continuously monitors all its application units and performs scheduled preventive maintenance to avert downtime. If service levels were to fall below preset parameters, advanced alerts and self-healing allow it to prevent problems from impacting service – even before customers identify initial symptoms. In addition, the solution's proactive approach ensures that problem resolution is initiated at a much earlier stage in the problem cycle, resulting in dramatically lower mean time to repair (MTTR) and maximum system availability.