

Straight Talking – User experience monitoring: How the right tools can boost productivity – Oct 2010

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Twenty-five years ago, if you wanted to know if the users of a given IT application were happy with their experience, you could usually just wander along the corridor and ask them. They were mostly in the same single central location as the computer running the application, using a VDU linked directly to that machine - one of only a few in the building.

It is all very different today. Users of most applications are widely dispersed. They can be using a range of devices to access numerous applications. The growth in the number of users is not just because many more employees have direct access to IT as part of their day-to-day job, it is also because applications are increasingly open to use by outsiders.

These outsiders are either active, such as supply chain partners, online shoppers and users of internet banking, or passive, for example, viewing video displays in stores or passing through ticket readers at train stations. If external users receive a poor experience they will at best be disgruntled and form a poor opinion of the organisation whose service has let them down, and at worst go to a competitor.

If internal users are dissatisfied, they may put up with it. However, that dissatisfaction can reduce the efficiency of business processes, lead employees to bypass procedures, which can harm compliance and provide an excuse for inactivity and distraction. Whether the users are internal or external, you cannot rely on them to report poor experience.

It is therefore essential for any organisation to be able to gauge the experience of all users and take effective action to improve it when it is not good enough. The service users receive depends on three things: their location, the network that connects them to the relevant applications and the run-time environment of the application itself.

The last of these, the run-time environment, has become even more problematic in the past 10 years with the increasing use of virtualisation and cloud-based services. Both have many benefits, but they also divorce applications from the hardware that drives underlying performance, which is being shared with other applications or, in the case of public cloud, with other organisations.

However, with the right tools firms can collect the data needed to understand and improve the user experience, including data gathered from a wide range of network and security devices: for example, routers, load balancers, and content filters. It also includes data on the performance of applications collected using specially located performance monitors.

There are a number of vendors that provide such tools. These include Visual Performance Manager from Visual Network Systems - VNS, née Fluke Networks - which combines both network and application performance monitoring to provide....a unified view of the user experience, a suite of products from SolarWinds which focuses on network performance, and tools from Opnet for both application and network monitoring.

The aim of using such tools is not just to improve the user experience, but to do so at an acceptable cost. Often the wrong resources are thrown at performance problems: for example, some people opt for more network bandwidth when a lack of processing power in a virtualised environment is causing the problem. Money is spent for little improvement.

In fact, with the understanding provided by user experience monitoring tools, you should be able to gain enough insight to make immediate improvements at no cost - for example, you might be able to schedule tasks at different

times, not run a batch report at periods of peak customer activity, or ask users to avoid certain bandwidth-hungry applications.

Other changes can be introduced quickly and may not cost that much, such as enforcing controls on internet usage through URL filtering, and moving content closer to users through content distribution services from providers such as Akamai or Limelight.

Of course, ultimately new networking equipment or more processing power may be the answer, but at least armed with the right data, the cost can be justified and the expected improvements are more likely to be achieved.

Putting all the components together to provide a comprehensive view of the user experience comes at a price. This cost includes not just the tools to consolidate, process and display statistics, but also the monitors to gather data. For large enterprises at least, as Quocirca argues in this free report on user experience monitoring, the total value proposition is sufficient to justify the necessary investment.

However, such monitoring is no longer just for large organisations. The barrier to entry has been lowered recently by VNS which has announced VPM Xpress - a single appliance that includes all the necessary components.

It is suitable for mid-market organisations with users spread over a limited geographic area or discrete parts of an enterprise where application performance can be critical to the experience of users, such as a call centre.

Information technology can be a wonderful thing when it works, but a miserable experience when it fails. This truth applies to all businesses, large and small. The technology is there to enable users, not frustrate them. Ensuring the experience is more often good than bad is the only way to create a productive harmony between humans and computers.

Quocirca's report; Use experience monitoring, can be downloaded free of charge at the following link:

<http://www.quocirca.com/reports/466/user-experience-monitoring>

About Quocirca

Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

Quocirca works with global and local providers of ITC products and services to help them deliver on the promise that ITC holds for business. Quocirca's clients include Oracle, Microsoft, IBM, O2, T-Mobile, HP, Xerox, EMC, Symantec and Cisco, along with other large and medium sized vendors, service providers and more specialist firms.

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