3 Reasons Network Ops Should Focus on App Performance

Cloud-based computing, whether for internal web apps or external third-party SaaS apps, fundamentally alters the job of IT and network operations teams. While these teams have historically focused on rolling out traditional on-premises solutions, they now find themselves supporting applications that are web-based and require a different set of skills. More importantly, applications have become front and center in their organizations. People care about their experience with the app rather than the network infrastructure behind the scenes working to deliver it.

Moving from a network-centric to an app-centric methodology

In order to support this shift, IT and network ops teams should focus on application performance, and move from a network-focused worldview to an app-centric one. IT and network ops teams need to oversee the end-user experience of the business-critical apps these organizations use every day.

With this environment as a backdrop, here are three reasons why your organization should be more app-centric.

1. Web applications are now driving your company.

Forrester estimates software spending will rise 10% by 2017, to $640 billion worldwide. Based on this growth path, it is easy to imagine a modern-day enterprise that actually uses zero on-premises software.

The bottom line is that web applications now drive your organization. More specifically, applications create opportunities for either new revenue or cost savings (usually in the form of improvements in employee efficiency). Yet many IT teams continue to focus on network performance rather than moving into measuring application performance and end-user experience with apps.

For IT and Network Operations teams to truly align themselves with business value, they need to focus on what generates that value: application performance. For some organizations, this may mean setting up a group that specifically focuses on application performance.

To focus on application performance, network teams need to be able to:

- Proactively monitor the experience of using the apps across the organization. Only by understanding use cases will IT teams be able to prioritize and respond appropriately.

- Understand what applications are in use and how they are impacting the infrastructure.

- Isolate application performance issues to either the app or the network.

2. You're responsible for web apps, whether you think you are or not.

The rise of shadow IT means that departments within a company can bypass IT teams to acquire software. But when these applications become slow or stop performing, IT and network ops become part of the troubleshooting chain. They need to be able to quickly identify where the problem exists. At the same time, those teams need visibility into what applications are being used for both planning and security.

Here is the cold, hard truth: Just because your organization uses web-based applications does not mean that IT and network ops personnel can just throw their hands in the air when there is a problem. As a director of infrastructure (and AppNeta customer) at a Fortune 1000 company put it best: "The reality is that we're on the hook, regardless of whether or not we were involved in the purchasing process. The big question is how you're going to support these apps when something goes wrong."

Unfortunately, most legacy network performance software providers have limited visibility into what applications are actually in use. To be effective, IT and network ops teams must source new tools that can provide application visibility.

Increasingly, apps are being developed in a distributed manner. They are sometimes distributed across multiple cloud providers and in hybrid environments. This mean that troubleshooting application performance has to take into account network performance. An application that exists in the cloud, but that calls back to a traditional data center for the data layer, is naturally affected by network performance.

Applications also increasingly rely on third-party services to deliver key functionality. If the application utilizes a third-party service such as a payment gateway and the network connectivity between the app and the third-party is slow, then the app may stop performing as well. And while applications development teams should be designing around such co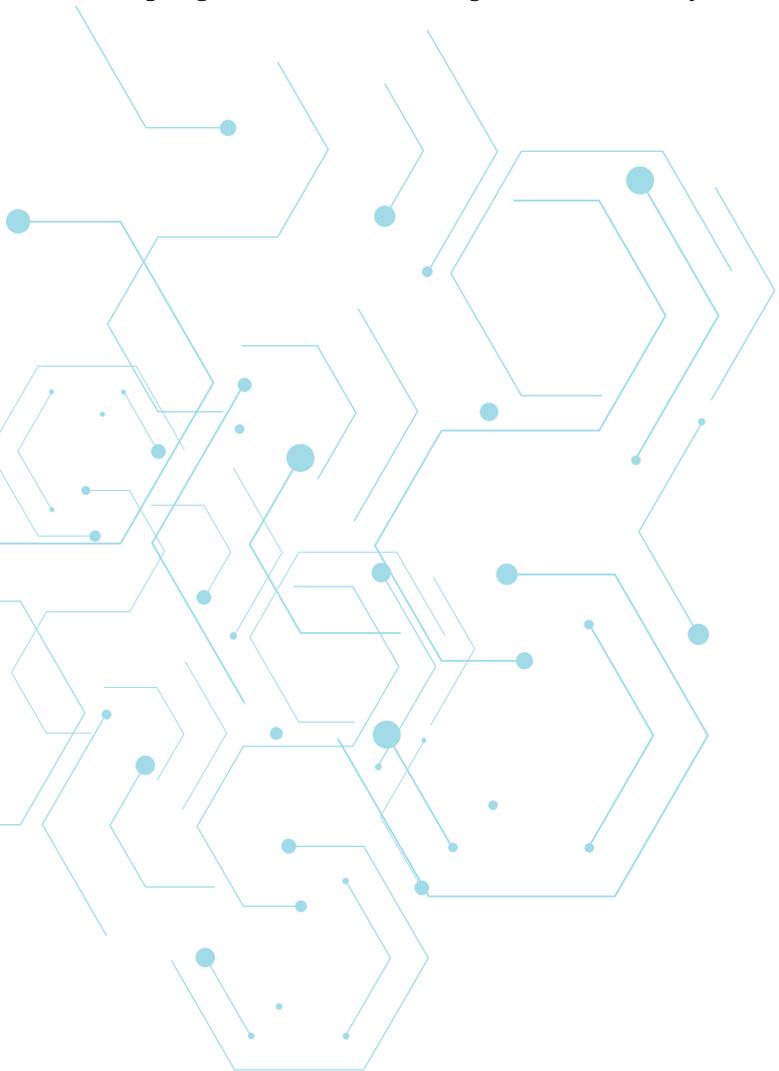ntingencies, the reality is that most developers assume services will always be available and that the delays in getting to that service will be minimal.

The increasing adoption of third-party SaaS applications makes the view even more complicated. In a complex organization it is not uncommon to have dozens of SaaS applications in use alongside internally developed application. Yet most IT and network operations teams do not have the tools in place to look at application performance across all apps.

By taking an application-centric view, IT and network operations teams will better align with business goals and metrics, and also enhance the ability of these team to prioritize issues as they happen. Knowing that a network connection between a cloud hosting provider and a data center might be important or not. With an app-centric view, support teams will know which support tickets need to be acted on first.

Balancing the need for public cloud flexibility with private cloud control and security has resulted in a complex hybrid cloud environment that causes problems for the IT departments that attempt to manage them. Understanding the common problems for hybrid cloud management in multi-location, high-transaction enterprises is the first step to implementing a better approach to performance monitoring.

The rise of widespread web application adoption shows no signs of slowing. IT and network ops need to move beyond the infrastructure to examine the end-user experience for all apps. In order to make this transition, these teams need to re-orient themselves to what their users care about: application performance. That means new team structures and responsibilities, along with a careful consideration of whether they have the right tools to get the job done. Teams that successfully make this transition will align themselves better with core business metrics and provide more overall value to their organization. Those that do not will find their role in the organization marginalized, becoming yet another IT organization where the CEO will say "they just don't get it."