

INTERNET & TECHNOLOGY

Finally, Software Designed For Users

An Overlooked Factor

Monitoring applications aim to resolve problems between keyboard, chair

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Companies have long used software systems to monitor the performance of hardware such as servers and desktop computers. Now a new class of software shows how well corporate software programs are performing for users.

This overlooked function is known as end-user experience management. The goal is to make business software run faster and more efficiently, says Jean-Pierre Garbani of Forrester Research.

"If the software response time takes forever to come back after you enter the data and make a transaction, that's highly disruptive," Garbani said.

Almost three-fourths of all software errors first get detected by frustrated end users, Forrester says. This causes a big drain on worker output. That's why more companies should look at problems from the user standpoint, Garbani says.

To avoid such slowdowns, more firms are installing probes on their computer networks. Such probes, or software agents, are used to measure software response times.

Passive systems can keep track of software performance. Active systems can send out alerts or trigger other changes to the system. In this way, software logjams can be reduced or even prevented.

"One good measure of success is end-user satisfaction," Garbani said. "That translates directly into user productivity."

The market for user-monitoring software is small, but Forrester expects global sales to grow 10% this year to more than \$220 million.

Major names in this emerging segment include Hewlett-Packard^{HPO}, IBM^{IBM}, CA^{CA}, BMC Software^{BMC}



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Knoa CEO

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and Compuware^{CPWR}.

Many smaller software firms also compete. They include Knoa Software, Serden Technologies, Coradiant and Quest Software^{QSFT}.

Knoa is a privately held company based in New York City. It makes software that tracks programs from SAP^{SAP}, Microsoft^{MSFT} and Siebel Systems, a unit of Oracle^{ORCL}.

Knoa's passive approach installs software agents on a user's desktop. Such agents monitor applications usage and transaction support times. That helps companies detect the cause of abandoned transactions and other errors.

British Telecom^{BT}, for instance, had planned a major upgrade of its Siebel software for customer support last year. BT also wanted to double its number of service workers who used Siebel to 16,000.

After the upgrade, initial system scans showed that all Siebel transactions were meeting BT's target response time of three seconds or less. Yet certain users still had software error rates three times higher than their peers.

A deep analysis of the work flow process uncovered the root problem. Some BT workers were making errors in the way they were validating customers. That caused a software slowdown for users.

By fixing the process, BT boosted productivity and cut down on costly tech support. Now, BT not only knows if a software application is providing a solid experience for users, but also if workers are using it efficiently, says Stuart Smith, a software manager for BT Retail.

"With Knoa, we were able to validate that system errors fell by 25% and user errors declined by 34%," Smith said by e-mail.

Such benefits are common with the use of monitoring programs, says Knoa Chief Executive Thad Eidman. He says that more than half of all the issues that slow software performance stem from the ways people actually use the software.

"Major corporations spend an enormous amount of money on enterprise applications," Eidman said. "To derive the full value, they need to focus on the management of user performance."

In many cases, software agents reside on a user's desktop. From there, they track computer memory and processing power. They can also collect information by intercepting some network traffic.

Another approach involves simulating actual software transactions to see how quickly certain tasks get done. In some cases, the software is packaged as a hardware appliance that plugs in to a server.

Regardless of the format, end user monitoring does more than just find out the source of software problems. Such systems also collect data to report on the overall health of a business, says Cameron Haight, a Gartner analyst.

Another gain can come in mergers and acquisitions. Buyers may use monitoring systems to gauge the effectiveness of software at newly acquired companies. Then training programs can be set up to make those software systems more effective for users. This approach can reduce the risk of software failures in a merger, Eidman says.

"You have to understand the performance that an individual actually achieves," he said.