

Athenahealth Streamlines Network Management with Infosim® StableNet®

Executive Summary

Athenahealth, a provider of cloud-based healthcare software, will replace more than a half-dozen stand-alone network management tools with Infosim® StableNet®. StableNet®, an enterprise network availability and performance management system, will help unify operations by providing customizable dashboards and network transparency to all key stakeholders in Athenahealth's IT organization.

Introduction

Athenahealth is a fast-growing software-as-a-service company in Watertown, Mass. For the networking team, that growth has led to a significant amount of management tool creep. The networking team manages a multivendor network, with 260 devices from Cisco, Juniper Networks, and Aruba Networks. In addition to vendor-specific element management systems, the team uses close to a dozen other network management tools on a day-to-day basis.

“Even for simple bandwidth trending we were using three or four different tools,” said Brian Lubelczyk, senior manager of data networks at Athenahealth.

The fractured management toolset has been complicated further by the fact that the company's network operations center (NOC) is traditionally responsible for the company's infrastructure monitoring and capacity planning tools. The network engineering team has had no input into monitoring tool selection in the NOC, so it was forced to assemble its own set of point management tools to fill in the gaps left open by the NOC's preferred service assurance platform from Monolith Software.

This organic approach to assembling a toolset left the network engineering team with management tools and practices that were too inefficient for a growing company. When Athenahealth's network engineering team received reports of a slow application in the data center, the news has typically triggered a series of actions across a fragmented tool chain with too many gaps.

“We would log in to NetBrain to find out where the servers were connected,” Lubelczyk said. “Then we would look into Cacti for WAN bandwidth graphs. We would look in Observium for the CPUs of the devices the traffic was going through. And then Monolith was the monitoring tool used by the NOC, so we would go in there to look for traps and errors. We didn't have reliable threshold alarming because Monolith didn't do a good job there. That's where Nagios would come in. That was a lot of processes for a WAN bandwidth issue.”

HIGHLIGHTS

Customer name: Athenahealth

Customer domain: Cloud-based Healthcare Software



Vendor name: Infosim®

Product name: StableNet®

Product function: Network Change, Configuration, Availability and Performance Monitoring



Infosim®'s Customized Dashboards and Reports Will be Essential

To address these inefficiencies, Athenahealth's network engineering team decided to evaluate several network availability and performance monitoring solutions. The team was looking for a tool that could monitor the health and performance of the company's multivendor network and replace the majority of the point management tools being used. After narrowing the search to Infosim® StableNet®, Lubelczyk and his team conducted a successful proof of concept and elected to adopt the solution. StableNet® will replace more than a half-dozen point management tools and streamline network management practices.

Athenahealth was especially interested in a tool that would allow users to create custom dashboards. This was important because the company's NOC continues to use Monolith as its core service monitoring platform. Lubelczyk wanted a tool that he and other engineers could use to create and share dashboards with other groups in the IT organization. With Infosim® StableNet®, an engineer can create a chart or graph that provides a view of network specific to the interests of other groups in the IT organization. Then he can share a reusable link to that dashboard view.

"We wanted to give custom dashboard views to very specific groups for complete network transparency," Lubelczyk said. "If [the NOC engineers] were troubleshooting an issue, we wanted to give them a persistent link to a dashboard view into the network."

Infosim® will allow the engineering team to ditch Cacti, RANCID, Observium, Nagios, NetBrain, and a variety of Python management scripts running on a Linux box. Now, when the NOC contacts the network engineering team about an issue, an engineer will be able to create a graph that shows all the critical links that serve that application and forward it to the NOC.

"The NOC or someone else can look at those links and see that none of the ports are at capacity, that there are no errors on the network. It should be a lot easier of a process," Lubelczyk said.

Athenahealth will also be using StableNet® to monitor the performance and quality of applications and voice over IP (VoIP) at more than a dozen branch offices. Infosim® will help the company deploy Banana Pi-based agents at each location. These probes will periodically perform synthetic VoIP and application tests to monitor remote user experience.

"We looked at three or four probe companies for that solution," Lubelczyk said. "But they would all have [had] to be off-box. With Infosim®, we're getting that testing integrated into StableNet®."

No-Nonsense Licensing and Sales Engineering

For Athenahealth, Infosim®'s sales engineers were a differentiator. Lubelczyk said that when he engaged with the company about a StableNet® proof of concept, the engineers helped him build the project. They were fully transparent about licensing, and they made no false promises.

During the proof-of-concept phase, the sales engineering team was able to quickly isolate every issue that Athenahealth encountered. And the sales engineers offered no-nonsense answers to every question Lubelczyk and his team asked.

"Every vendor says that [its products] can do everything," he said. "I really liked my [Infosim®] sales engineer. He answered all our questions, and he didn't promise things that couldn't be done. The licensing was very transparent, and they made the price work."

"I discovered them at Cisco Live two years ago, and I was really impressed overall with how well they were able to hit everything we wanted to do on this project, from monitoring to capacity planning and transparency of the network. The more we used the product, the more we liked it."

EMA Perspective

Athenahealth's experience with Infosim® StableNet® aligns quite closely with the findings in the ENTERPRISE MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATES® (EMA™) 2014 report, "EMA Radar™ for Enterprise Network Availability Monitoring Systems (ENAMS)." Infosim® StableNet® scored very high in terms of functionality and overall architecture and integration. StableNet® was recognized for having a broad set of capabilities, and these capabilities will allow Athenahealth to reduce the number of management tools its networking team uses. EMA had also found that Infosim® had a high degree of customizability in its reporting capabilities. Many enterprises fail to take advantage of such a feature in ENAMS products, but Athenahealth will be an exception.

One key limitation EMA discovered in its ENAMS Radar was Infosim®'s limited presence in North America. The company is based in Germany and is still expanding its footprint in North America. Athenahealth discovered Infosim® during a chance encounter at Cisco Live. The strength of the solution, rather than Infosim®'s market presence, won over this customer. The positive experience that Athenahealth had with Infosim®'s sales engineering team suggests that Infosim® is on the right track in terms of North American sales and support.

Additionally, EMA has consistently found that networking teams suffer from management tool creep. Networking professionals simply use too many management systems. Some large enterprises use as many as 25 different network management tools, and even many smaller enterprises use between five and ten. It's important to note that these are just the tools that are actually in use. It does not include "shelfware" that has been purchased but never used. While many of these management systems might be so-called "best-of-breed" technologies, this multitool approach to network management is inefficient. The workflow involved in moving from one tool to another and then another is time-consuming. These individual tools are typically not integrated, which creates visibility gaps between them that can lead to service degradations and even outages going unnoticed until end users register a complaint.

Given this fractured landscape of management systems, EMA recommends that enterprises adopt Athenahealth's strategy of consolidating management toolsets. This company's decision to replace multiple network management systems with a single network availability monitoring system like Infosim® StableNet® should pay off in terms of improved network performance and streamlined operations.

About EMA

Founded in 1996, Enterprise Management Associates (EMA) is a leading industry analyst firm that provides deep insight across the full spectrum of IT and data management technologies. EMA analysts leverage a unique combination of practical experience, insight into industry best practices, and in-depth knowledge of current and planned vendor solutions to help its clients achieve their goals. Learn more about EMA research, analysis, and consulting services for enterprise line of business users, IT professionals and IT vendors at www.enterprisemanagement.com or blogs.enterprisemanagement.com. You can also follow EMA on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) or [LinkedIn](#).

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