

Looking for Trouble (Tickets)

By Drew Robb

WHEN it comes to IT service, it's both who you know and what you know that matters. The person on the phone doesn't care whether he reported his problem to someone else on another shift. He expects you to know who he is and the exact status of his service request without having to repeat what he told the last person he spoke with.

But it is not just customer or employee complaints one needs to be concerned with. Many servers, SANs, workstations, network devices and even infrastructure such as air conditioners and UPSes will speak up when there is an impending problem. "The more systems have predictive maintenance features which tell when they need service instead of doing preemptive service, the better off you are," says Rick Sawyer, Director of Data Center Technology for American Power Conversion Corporation. "That way the technicians are focused on what really needs fixing."

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To keep track of all the trouble tickets, organizations spent \$3 billion on IT service desk software last year, according to market research firm META Group, Inc. of Stamford, CT. Added to that is all the money spent for CRM, Knowledge Management, bug tracking and call center management software which also includes trouble ticketing functions.

Now, if you have already gone through the work of installing and implementing a Help Desk, CRM or call center package to manage your service requests, and it is working as it should, you already have this problem under control. But if you are one of those people that still relies on spread sheets or post-it notes to keep track of service issues,

here are three options for managing trouble tickets that won't cost \$50,000 or take six months to put in place.

ASKING MOM FOR HELP

For Microsoft-centric firms, one option is to take advantage of the features in the Microsoft Operations Manager (MOM).

Last November, Microsoft issued five Solution Accelerators (SAs) for MOM 2005 including one for automatically generating trouble tickets. The Autoticketing SA's functions are laid out in a November 22, 2004 TechNet paper entitled *Autoticketing Solution Accelerator*. Among the benefits Microsoft lists for the Autoticketing SA are:

- ▼ Reduced labor costs since the tickets are automatically generated;
- ▼ Reduced error through eliminating manual data input;
- ▼ Decreased time to repair since the ticket is generated immediately and updated on the activity list of the administrator responsible; and
- ▼ Increased availability due to catching a problem before it escalates.

The Autoticketing SA is a three-tiered process. The application layer consists of MOM, the trouble ticketing application, inventory management or asset management software containing the data necessary for filling out the trouble ticket, and any additional third party software. The other two are an event integration layer and a business logic layer containing the necessary rules.

The Solution Accelerator utilizes a seven step workflow.

1. Retrieve alerts from MOM. Using MOM Connector Framework (MCF), collect alerts with resolution state set to "AutoTicket."
2. Apply filtering. Use this business logic to check if the alert meets specific criteria and matches other system conditions. This

helps determine if the autoticket workflow should continue to the next step.

3. Update state to "Pending." Use MCF for setting the state to "Pending" instead of its default "New."
4. Apply business logic. Use the predetermined business logic to resolve data issues, so that the ticket information is complete.
5. Create ticket. Use the connection on the TT system to create a new ticket.
6. Update attributes in MOM. Upon successful creation of the ticket, update the attributes in MOM.
7. Call AckData method for all alerts retrieved. Acknowledge the alert after the workflow is completed.

This trouble ticketing function is limited to Microsoft devices and applications. It may appeal to those already using MOM, but on its own will not get people to pay MOM's per server licensing fees.

WEBTTS

WebTTS is a web-based call center application from Somix Technologies, Inc. (www.somix.com) of Sanford, Maine. The company has a free single-user version and an unlimited-seat version for \$4995, including one year's support. It has its own SQL data base or can extract data via an ODBC connection from an existing contact manager such as Microsoft ACT or Front Range Solutions, Inc.'s Goldmine. Since it is web-based, it can be used by mobile or home workers, as well as those in the office.

For ease of use, and to eliminate data entry errors, WebTTS utilizes pull down menus and can populate the trouble ticket form with information from the contact manager or WebTTS's own CRM database. Administrators can use the administrative tools to assign the tickets to the technician responsible for that type of issue. It also has a built-in Knowledge Base function. With a click of a button, users can create an article and transfer the data to it from the trouble ticket.

WebTTS also contains a reporting function allowing users to find common problems and how much support time and money is being spent addressing them. Managers can then target the top resource drains for amelioration. When WebTTS is installed on the same server as Ipswitch, Inc.'s WhatsUp management software, any trouble tickets that show up also show up on the devices being managed in WhatsUp interface. It also integrates with Somix's OSTivity Asset Manager.

FREWARE TICKETING

A third option is a free open-source product called the Open Ticket Resource System (OTRS) from the Germany-based OTRS Team (www.otrs.org). It works on Windows (30MB download), Linux (6.5MB) and UNIX (6.5MB) and supports 13 languages. It only supports the MySQL and PostGreSQL databases.

This is a simple ticketing application for standalone use. The price is right, but organizations that require greater integration with other applications, databases or management software, should look elsewhere.

SIZING THINGS UP

For companies that don't have a ticketing system in place, any of the above would be an improvement, but they all have different uses.

MANAGING CHANGE: TROUBLE TICKETING CASE STUDY

Synergent Corporation in Portland, Maine, switched to Somix WebTTS call center software to merge its help desk and change management functions. The company provides a variety of services to 150 New England credit unions including check and credit card processing, and the printing of advertising materials. 54 of those credit unions also contract with Synergent to provide online data processing services.

"We are a 'menu shop,'" says Chet Emerson, the credit union support manager. "Customers can pick and choose the services they want."

Synergent was already using FrontRange's Heat help desk software, but a lot of the customer requests required custom programming. This meant paper-transferring the job over to a change management system and then back to Heat to finish the trouble ticket. Switching to WebTTS allowed the company to manage the entire workflow from a single piece of software.

"Prior we had two systems to manage our call tracking and change management," Emerson continues. "With WebTTS, we were able to retire both of them and move to a paperless process."

He says that this has enabled Synergent to cut its licensing costs, eliminate redundancies and streamline operations. Since it is web based, service representatives can directly enter trouble tickets into the system while visiting customer offices. This gets problems to the developer or analysts quicker and speeds customer service.

"I've been in data processing a long time, and I was concerned about the acceptability and ease of implementation," he says. "It was one of the easiest I have done. One day we were on the old system and the next day on WebTTS, which says a lot about the quality of their support."

The Microsoft solution is the most complex to set up and it is limited to generating tickets on managed Windows equipment. It wouldn't be used to take help desk calls. Its price is either nothing (if you already have MOM licenses) or around \$500 per server. OTRS, though, is OK for those who just need the simplest level of ticket management functionality, without any bells and whistles.

WebTTS, on the other hand, is for those who want greater functionality without paying the full price to set up something like BMC's Remedy Service Desk. WebTTS is commercially supported, has reporting and management functions, a knowledge base, and integrates with other databases and applications. It takes less than a day to set up and does not require a dedicated server. The question an organization needs to answer is if it only needs the barebones functions of something like OTRS or if the additional features of WebTTS will save it money despite the license fee. 🐞

NaSPA member Drew Robb is a Los Angeles based writer who focuses on technology issues.