

AppAnalyzer Pinpoints E-mail Bottlenecks for Lee County School District



Saving time and money while maintaining the technology that allows teachers and administrators to efficiently share information, like student attendance figures, is critical to any school district.

However, the e-mails and attachments used to share information can cause mail server problems, such as message bottlenecks and lack of storage space. For Lee County School District, mail server problems left systems administrators with two choices: Keep increasing hardware, or change the way the schools use the system. Understanding how e-mail is being used (and misused) allows systems administrators to provide alternative methods of communication, helping users while lowering costs.

Customer Profile

Industry

With approximately 57,000 students, Lee County is among the 100 largest school districts in the United States and is the largest employer in Lee County.

Business Situation

With 6,400 e-mail users in 91 different sites, the district has long recognized the need to monitor and manage e-mail traffic. The product previously used to analyze e-mail usage didn't scale very well—taking up to four hours to generate basic reports. It was also unreliable and crashed frequently, requiring extra hours to manage the management tool.

Solution

Business Scenario

Traffic was growing at a rapid pace, to the point that the e-mail servers were often running at maximum capacity and users faced significant delays in mail delivery.

Benefits

Provides critical information on e-mail usage, allowing systems administrators to understand users' needs, identify bottlenecks and recommend changes in order to keep the e-mail system performing optimally with minimal hardware resource expenses.

Product

Sirana's AppAnalyzer for Exchange

CASE STUDY

"Because of problems with our previous e-mail administration tool, we didn't have any idea why our traffic was rising so quickly. AppAnalyzer reports helped us quickly identify the causes for the traffic increases and made it possible to take actions that are saving the district a lot of money, which can be devoted to other academic projects."

—**Dennis Osterhouse**, Systems Administrator, Lee County School District

Rapidly Growing E-mail Traffic

Lee County School District's Exchange e-mail system serves about 5,000 users in the district's schools and 1,400 administrative users. With traffic volumes growing, hardware resource utilization was running at 95-100 percent at various times during the day, causing significant delivery delays. Officials thought they would need new hardware to handle the heavy loads.

System administrators had no way to determine where the traffic originated and whether or not it was really necessary. In an effort to get a grip on the problem, the district bought a tool designed for Exchange server analysis and reporting—but they soon ran into problems. This tool was originally designed to work with the Microsoft Access database. While it had been modified to support SQL Server, it didn't take advantage of native SQL Server specific functionality. The result was that reports took up to four hours to run and the data was often outdated by the time it was available. Another problem was that the program, which runs as a WIN32 desktop application, crashed frequently. Technical support was also very difficult to obtain.

Finding a Robust Alternative

"I started surfing the Web looking for other products," said Dennis Osterhouse, Lee County School District Systems Administrator. "I came across some write-ups on AppAnalyzer that were very positive, including one in which Microsoft named it the best management tool or utility. I downloaded a trial copy, tried it and liked it. I found that the software offers a much wider range of reports than our previous program and that, even with our high-traffic volume, they run in a matter of seconds. Instead of waiting four hours for a particular report, I get the information I need immediately—usually within 10 seconds. I also like the fact that AppAnalyzer makes it easy to produce custom reports and that it integrates very well with Microsoft Office so that, for example, I can drag and drop a report into Excel and produce a color graph to easily make a point with administration. I showed these and other features to my boss; he was impressed, too, so we decided to buy it."

Pinpointing the Causes of Rising Traffic

"The first report that I created was to show the e-mail messages sent and received by each department and user," Osterhouse said. "The report immediately showed that a few high schools were generating a high proportion of the traffic. Investigating further with the AppAnalyzer report to show the messages sent and received by date and time, I noticed the traffic was particularly heavy at several times of day—about an hour after the students arrived in the morning and in the afternoon when they left. I also used a distribution list report to determine how much of the traffic could be tracked to particular distribution lists.

"The information provided by the reports made it relatively easy to understand why our traffic was rising so fast," Osterhouse said. "I made a few calls to teachers and they explained that after their first class they often create a spreadsheet with the attendance report and send it to the other teachers, alerting them to which students are absent that day. For many teachers, the simplest way to do this was to e-mail the spreadsheet as an attachment to an entire distribution list.

Taking Action to Solve the Problem

Osterhouse said that once the reasons for the rising traffic were well understood, he was able to develop alternatives that accomplish the same goal, reducing the strain on the servers.

AppAnalyzer also has the potential to detect excessive personal use or abuse of the e-mail system. "Our goal is not to become security cops, but we like the fact that the software gives us the ability to track individual usage," he said.

"The bottom line," Osterhouse said, "is that getting an understanding of who is sending what to whom is making it possible for us to slow the rate of traffic growth. With AppAnalyzer, we are getting our traffic under control to the point that our current hardware will be able to meet our needs for quite a long time."

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