At a Glance

Customer:
- Murphy-Hoffman Company
- Leading Kenworth, Hino, Ford, Volvo and Isuzu truck and truck services organization

Industry:
- Transportation, sales and finance
- Supports over 40,000 customers within central and southern U.S.
- Services include dealerships, refrigeration locations, leasing, rental and financial services

Location:
Headquarters based in Kansas City, MO with locations spanning 10 states

Challenge:
- Support wide range of proprietary and COTS applications
- Improve quality of service within core network
- Become proactive in monitoring network performance
- Maximize visibility within budget parameters
- Reduce time to identify and solve potential issues

Solution:
Visual Network Systems NetFlow Tracker™

Results:
- Enabled staff to do more by providing critical visibility on-demand across any location
- Reduced finger pointing and time to isolate network and application related issues
- Maximized investment by leveraging embedded NetFlow capabilities
- Improved troubleshooting with detailed visibility, isolation and issue resolution remotely
- Eliminated QOS issues with real-time and historical visibility

Murphy-Hoffman's network keeps on trucking with NetFlow Tracker

Overview

Murphy-Hoffman Company (MHC) has built its business on the belief that customer loyalty is only as strong as customer service. As MHC continues to grow and prosper, this belief permeates throughout the entire organization.

With over 40,000 customers spread across 10 states, the IT and network team at MHC has its work cut out to ensure the company's network runs like a fine-oiled machine. The diverse network supports services including sales, leasing, rental, refrigeration, body shop and support. In addition, the networking team must manage a diverse architecture that includes both custom and commercial off the shelf (COTS) software.

"With over 1,300 PCs and 100 servers in 50 physical locations talking to two data centers, we have challenges," states Ryan Branstetter, MHC director of technology. "Quite a few of our locations operate seven days, 24 hours, so uptime is critical, and outages or performance issues must be addressed immediately.

"Our IT organization and network team has always strived to stay ahead of the curve and not rely on luck to make sure the network is fine tuned," said Joe Evans, MHC senior systems engineer. "We are very proud our company is thought of as a leader in our industry, and our entire IT organization is a critical cog in the process."

"Over the past eight years, we have had a variety of management solutions ranging from SNMP polling to probes," added Ted Haubien, MHC's senior systems engineer. "But when we turned on NetFlow Tracker™, we were amazed at the level of granularity and the custom reporting options within the software platform. For doing our day-to-day jobs with network management, we haven't found a tool that meets our needs any better than NetFlow Tracker."

"As an organization, hiring the best people we can find and making sure they have cutting-edge tools like NetFlow Tracker available to perform their job has been a key part of our success in IT and ensures our network operates smoothly," observed Branstetter.

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MHC has fully implemented Visual Network Systems' NetFlow Tracker across the entire network to monitor bandwidth utilization, application flows, quality of service (QOS) settings and conversations pairs. The network team uses the real-time and historical views for proactive monitoring and troubleshooting and the customizable reporting engine to look at longer-term results.

Taking advantage of the embedded infrastructure

Like every organization in today's world, MHC has to stretch its IT-related resources to get the most mileage from its investments. "The equipment vendors have done a great job of putting this fantastic feature called NetFlow in their equipment," said Haubien. "However, the only thing missing is the data is virtually useless if you can't find a way to monitor and manage it."

"That's where NetFlow Tracker shines," added Haubien. "It allowed us to take advantage of the features embedded in our equipment, and turn NetFlow on in the devices at no cost. Then NetFlow Tracker collects and presents the millions or billions of data points in an easy-to-understand, useful format."

NetFlow Tracker is the only solution available today that can collect all of the flows across the network at all times. "We looked at other NetFlow collectors, but the ease of use and the granularity of NetFlow Tracker is the best on the market," concluded Haubien.

Solving day-to-day problems faster

When there was an issue for either the COTS or custom applications for MHC, the entire IT organization attempted to identify and solve the problem. This typically took a lot of time and effort to identify the cause.

"For example, if our CRM application wasn't performing well, the entire team looked at the situation to try and solve it as quickly as possible," said Evans. "There would be times when the server team said the servers look good, the application team said the app was fine and everything looked okay across the network. We'd spend a lot of time and effort, and each group thought their area was good, but the end user was still impacted."

"Traditionally, a lack of bandwidth is the first thing most people typically look at if an application is running slow," added Haubien. "But we run a lean network. We can't afford to throw bandwidth to every site every time there appears to be a problem. This is where NetFlow Tracker really came in to help us identify where a potential problem could be or where we knew it couldn't be."

When trying to monitor bandwidth, the biggest challenge for most network organizations is getting a high level of granularity without overburdening the network or adding significant costs.

"Before we deployed NetFlow Tracker, monitoring bandwidth was much harder and time consuming," concluded Evans. "We used to poll the devices in either 30 second or five-minute intervals, but the data was averaged, so it flattened out the peaks and valleys. With NetFlow Tracker, we can see every flow so we have the deepest level view for any device so we can quickly see if bandwidth is the culprit."

"Our role is unique. People never call to tell you how fast the network is or that everything is working great; it's always something is wrong," added Branstetter. "But with the right team and the right tools, our users enjoy having the best possible quality of experience."

Proving service levels with transport vendors

MHC implemented a MPLS-based network across its infrastructure using a Tier 1 service provider. The ability to prioritize traffic via QOS was a key feature the MHC staff leveraged. But even with the QOS prioritization, problems still occured.

"We had a branch open a ticket stating they had very poor performance trying to reach a few websites," stated Haubien. "At first, everything appeared fine; it was just a few sites they couldn't reach, and it appeared to be a DNS issue or something similar."

"We began investigating the QOS settings, and if we turned off QOS at the host site, the branch could reach all the websites again," added Haubien. "So it appeared to be a QOS issue, but when we talked with our service provider, they stated everything appeared fine on their end."

"With NetFlow Tracker, we set up a custom view and quickly saw that the QOS wasn't working correctly from our provider," concluded Haubien. "With the report, we saw exactly what was wrong, got on the call with our provider, and they fixed their configuration issue right away. Without NetFlow Tracker, there would have been a lot of finger-pointing back and forth. Who knows how long it would have taken to solve this problem?"

Drilling down as deep as you want need to go

MHC leverages NetFlow Tracker for both troubleshooting and proactive monitoring across the network infrastructure. MHC evaluated other network management tools, but chose NetFlow Tracker to meet its current and future needs.

"We really love the depth and granularity NetFlow Tracker provides. We didn't see another option available that could compare with its level of visibility," added Evans. "For example, if there was a virus or denial-of-service attack, we could quickly look at any location and see if a device has 3 million connections. Without NetFlow Tracker, we wouldn't have that level of detail to solve issues in a short period of time."

Keeping the organization on track to meet its goals

With a complex environment serving so many different types of applications and users, MHC needed additional management and troubleshooting capability to meet the corporate goal of providing the highest level of service quality across the entire organization. With a very lean organization, the IT and network team must be able to maximize their time and effort.

MHC's decision to deploy NetFlow Tracker enabled the networking team to meet and exceed its individual and team goals. "Even before NetFlow Tracker, we prided ourselves on the quality of our network and infrastructure," added Evans. "However, once we deployed it on our network, the level of granularity and the custom reporting made everything a lot easier and faster to identify, isolate and troubleshoot."

"The Visual Network Systems' products have been an MHC must-have since 2002," concluded Branstetter. "I don't know how we could operate without them and provide the same level of reliability and response time. MHC has been working with Visual Network Systems for over eight years, and we consider them to be one of our most important partners."

About Visual Network Systems

Visual Network Systems provides innovative solutions that support IT professionals responsible for enterprise-wide application, network and VoIP performance. The company's flagship solution, Visual Performance Manager, is a unified system that provides enterprise service intelligence to help organizations effectively deliver these services. Its solutions are available directly to enterprises or as part of a managed services offering. Visual Networks Systems is headquartered in Colorado Springs, CO, and distributes its products in more than 50 countries. More information can be found by visiting Visual Network Systems website at: www.visualnetworksystems.com or by calling (888) 293-5853.

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