All eyes need to be on service assurance

InterComms spoke with two experts from gen-E, a service assurance specialist and IBM middleware reseller: Anand Thummalapalli, VP of Product Management, and Chip Chambers, VP of Strategy and Business Development. Both highlighted the need for communication service providers [CSPs] to get much smarter about service assurance if their digital transformation strategies are to succeed

Q: Let's start off with your relationship IBM. You bring much more to the service-assurance table than simply reselling Big Blue's software, don't you?
A: Anand Thummalapalli (AT): Absolutely. Not only do we have a long history in service assurance, but we've also built a suite of our own software applications/products that complement client's existing service assurance investments. It means clients get a greater return on investment. We're very strong on big data analytics, so we can collect and process huge amounts of information that's coming from the network. This is a must. Software-based technologies tend to have more issues in the early stages of rollout, and today's [network] devices are much more 'noisy' and 'chatty'. This often results in a barrage of alarms to the NOC [network operations centre]. We dig through that noise and help both enterprises and CSPs understand better what's going on in their network, and how their services are actually performing.

Q: How do you engage with CSPs?
A: AT: We're proactive. We perform a 'health check,' which includes first determining the current status of the network, then we work with our clients' stakeholders and our internal best practices experts to determine where the CSP needs to be – in terms of their transformation strategy – and work out the best roadmap to get there. The health check is not focused on technology deployments, but on the state of the business, and how service assurance and operational efficiencies might be improved. We have a solid set of best practices, with various sets of metrics, so we can come back to the client and explain what their roadmap should look like for particular functional areas. It's not about pointing fingers, but about how to improve operations. We encourage clients to do a health check at least once a year.

Q: What do the health checks typically uncover?
A: AT: Health checks uncover many opportunities for improvement. In many cases, there are unused entitlements that could potentially remedy some of the shortfalls that are exposed. Many clients aren't getting the most leverage from their existing installs due to an incomplete implementation or lack of professional services. Also, many clients haven't been applying data analytics properly. The NOC still gets bombarded with a fair amount of alarms because CSPs are not really leveraging the analytics that can be completed before presenting information to NOC users. This is where our Professional Services Success Packs come in, which include event analytics and the 'grouping' of events, which cut down on the number of duplicate tickets. In a recent project with a Tier 1 operator, we achieved a NOC noise reduction of **75% (see case study) from just the first phase of optimization.** That's massive. It shows that many CSPs really need to get more sophisticated about service assurance.

Chip Chambers (CC): Cutting down on NOC noise, though, is only the beginning of the phased approach we take when it comes to improving operational efficiencies and enabling service assurance. Once we understand what 'normal' is, we set up an automated process to diagnose problems. We then capture that diagnosis and use it the next time, eliminating the need to perform the same manual tasks over and over again It's key to what we do, and accounts for a lot of the value we bring to clients. Underlying technologies and services might vary from one CSP to another, but the overall analytics methodologies are the same.

AT: Another value-add is the unification of different systems with a common front-end. It's the next generation to a 'single sign-on'. We have the ability to take various UIs [user interfaces] from disparate systems and put them into a single dashboard, or a set of dashboards, which takes into account who is using them within the organisation. You don't have to log into a number of OSSs [operations systems support]. We're cutting all that out.

CC: We're also agnostic to different infrastructure and cloud service providers. Our solution works in a multi-vendor environment. It's another key part of our value proposition on fault- performance monitoring. We can give CSPs a complete picture, and put all the data collected into a common format.

Q: You mentioned 'roadmap'. Do CSPs have clear ideas where they want to be in the future? And if they do, how can gen-E help them get there?
A: AT: This is where our experience really helps. Our professional services team includes solutions architects and business analysts, many of which have been decision-makers at CSPs in the past. We know first-hand the problems and obstacles that our clients are facing. In terms of roadmap, and having a clear vision of where CSPs want to be, I think Tier 2 operators are generally more mature than Tier 1s. They often seem more determined to transform their operations.

CC: I'd add that our clients benefit from our vast experience that we've accumulated while helping other clients tackle the same problem. That's important. We're not showing up [at a client] and doing it for the first time. We're showing up with about 20 other examples of what we can do.

Q: Do CSPs, generally speaking, see service assurance as a number one priority?
A: AT: From the standpoint of 'next-generation services', such as SD-WAN or some new wireless offerings, I still see CSPs launching them with no eyes on how they're actually doing. In the old days, when launching new services, service providers often took the view that they needed to get

the BSS [business systems support] in order first, so they could start billing customers at the earliest opportunity. In today's world, that kind of thinking will likely backfire. You have to give much more attention to service assurance. The customer is far more finicky now, and will ditch their service provider and go somewhere else if they're not satisfied. It's also easier for consumers to switch, which makes it even more important that all eyes are on service assurance. CSPs which don't do that will be shooting themselves in the foot.

For more information visit: www.gen-e.com

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gen-E case study: Tier 1 MSO in the US

Phase 1 and 2 of the gen-E's event lifecycle optimisation
Results included:

➤ additional 75% alarm reduction of presented alarms;
➤ network management fully deployed to include core network, routing, switching and access networks;
➤ 55% domain management optimisation to enable better root cause analysis;
➤ regional-based domains implemented; and
➤ topology maps created to better manage and enable correlation.

Data and application visualisation and integration
Results included:

➤ 75% reduction in costs associated with NOC Tier 1 & Tier2 support;
➤ 63% reduction in costs associated with field engineers; and
➤ 56% reduction in costs associated with NOC managers.

Source: gen-E

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5 Stages of the Event Lifecycle

Events are monitored via fault, performance, and configuration management systems across the network, server and/or cloud.

Detect

1,000,000 events detected

Service data is collected pertaining to events, and events are enriched with contextual information.

Enrich

reduced to 250,000

Relationships between events and the business impact of events are identified via advanced correlation.

Correlate

reduced to 225,000

Events are automatically prioritized with known criteria, and automatically updated with the required response – corrective action, notification, documentation, escalation.

Prioritize

reduced to 213,750

Events are remediated through automation of stages 2 – 4.

Automate