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Closing the gap

F5's John Matthews on the importance of getting the application and network teams on the same page.

John Matthews, F5 Networks' vice president of IT, sat down with Tracy Thompson, F5 World's editor in chief, to discuss how the relationship between application and network groups is changing.



One reasonable win may be all it takes to bring applications and networking together, says F5's John Matthews.

Q Traditionally, in IT, the application and network teams have been at odds with one another. Why is that?

A Application teams frequently viewed the network as simple connectivity and routing. Network teams viewed the application as another security incident or performance problem waiting to happen. There was also a lack of process and coordination between the teams in designing and deploying applications or services. If problems arose with an application post-deployment, that lack of coordination often resulted in finger pointing during troubleshooting and diagnosis.

Q Is that changing today?

A It's a natural progression and it is changing. All it takes to bridge the divide is one reasonable win where the network people helped the application people do something faster and better. And the application developers recognize that it actually was this tool out there on the network that allowed them to accomplish that. For example, with us, a big win might be derived from our BIG-IP application delivery product, and its ability to smartly load balance between devices. Add our iRules programming language on top of that, and there's a ton of automatic server offload stuff we can perform without spending a lot of additional money. I think everyone sees the value in that.

Q Technology and "big wins" are ways of bridging the gap, but how else can you

get these teams to work together?

A Well, nothing can sour a team effort faster than a member or members who carry past baggage because there previously was no coordination between network and application teams. The people of a project are clearly the most important part, so selecting team members judiciously is essential to success.

Q And this doesn't have to involve complex management processes?

A Not at all. I've seen creative ways to ensure that team members work together. It can be as simple as a written code of conduct that all members sign and agree to follow, to something as significant as reorganizing and aligning team members around a project or even a new "IT architecture" department.

The important element is that the team has one document to refer to or one person to report to in order to resolve conflict.

Q In selecting the underlying network technology and the design of the applications or services, are there some clear objectives that need to be defined by this newly integrated team?

A Objectives are frequently based upon past lessons learned. For example, in the past we may have had problems with application performance where the appli-

cation or service was connection-limited. This problem resulted in a lot of end-user complaints regarding performance and even led to outages. So the first objective may be for the network to help provide flexible scale and better performance. This can be accomplished through virtualization of the applications, which can help overcome the connection-limit problem. F5 products can be a critical part of overcoming that problem as well.

Q And that can drive other key objectives?

A Yes. For example, for virtualization to work effectively, the network and the application will need to have some type of communication indicating the health of the application. You don't want the network sending a user to an unhealthy application, node, or service. So the second objective would be that this bidirectional health communication must take place between the network and application. Again, that can be another example of a win. And the more the application and network teams experience those wins, the more they'll see the value of working together.

It's already happening, and I think F5's technology is key. I like to think of our gear as the materials for the bridge that is currently being built between the two teams. *