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Myke Borylo
Senior Web Infrastructure Engineer



American Century Investments Uses TRUE Technology and BIG-IP LTM to Achieve Highest Application Service Levels



Industry

Financial services

Challenges

- Maintain high service levels for the company’s internal portal and web applications
- Accurately monitor the user experience to troubleshoot and fix performance issues

Solutions

- F5 BIG-IP® Local Traffic Manager™ with iRules™ scripting language
- SymphonIQ® TrueView Express™

Benefits

- Quick access to real user performance data
- Faster issue resolution and improved service levels
- Greater collaboration between infrastructure and applications teams

Overview

American Century Investments is a leading investment management company with a strong dedication to providing extremely responsive service. To be able to maintain a high performance level for the company’s web-based applications on its corporate portal, the IT department needed a more accurate way to evaluate application performance than the synthetic transaction monitoring they had in place.

Through a partnership developed by SymphonIQ and F5, American Century Investments is now able to monitor the application performance as actually experienced by all of its users. By implementing the SymphonIQ TrueView product with its existing F5 BIG-IP Local Traffic Manager, American Century Investments has a precise monitoring and troubleshooting tool that helps its IT department keep internal applications running at peak performance to optimize employee productivity.

Challenges

American Century Investments provides services to a wide range of clients across a variety of investment disciplines. These clients expect extremely responsive service levels that American Century Investments consistently seeks to exceed, and the company sets the same service level standards for its internal services. The company’s IT team operates an extensive internal corporate portal that runs Oracle applications and

provides an operational backbone for 2,200 employees.

To help the company maintain these exacting service levels, the IT department previously had synthetic transaction monitoring in place. This monitoring technique only provided information about the availability of its websites and certain functionalities, and it frequently produced false alarms that indicated performance problems when no actual users were experiencing them. This resulted in wasted time and troubleshooting resources, and did not provide the clear data the IT team needed to assess website and application performance.

American Century Investments evaluated several products to find a solution that would monitor actual rather than synthetic user transactions, along with other important criteria. “We wanted to be able to monitor the transactions as deeply as possible, from the user’s browser all the way to our database and back,” explains Myke Borylo, Senior Web Infrastructure Engineer at American Century Investments. “We were also looking for a tool that would help us troubleshoot and track down the problems we have, not just tell us there’s a problem.”

Solution

After its initial evaluations, Borylo’s team decided to do a proof of concept with the SymphonIQ TrueView product. SymphonIQ’s patent-pending TRUE (The Real



User Experience) technology traces all web transactions from the browser through the database, collecting performance data at each tier of the application delivery infrastructure.

As the proof of concept progressed, F5 and Symphoniq developed a partnership to integrate Symphoniq's TRUE technology with the F5 BIG-IP Local Traffic Manager (LTM) using F5's iRules scripting language and iControl API. American Century Investments was already a BIG-IP LTM customer, so Symphoniq offered Borylo the opportunity to beta-test the new integrated solution, TrueView Express.

"Because F5 has the very powerful technology of iRules and iControl built into every BIG-IP appliance, we saw an opportunity to integrate with that and use it as a springboard to inject our application into the end user's browser," says Hon Wong, CEO at Symphoniq. "Whereas typically we might use an agent off the web tier, which is much more complicated and introduces a lot more risk into the infrastructure, now we can leverage the F5 platform to achieve the same end with much better results and much lower risk."

Implementing TrueView Express was a seamless process that required "a half a day's work at most, including testing," according to Borylo. He adds that other than a basic understanding of the infrastructure, the product didn't require any particular technical knowledge or BIG-IP LTM experience to implement because the scripted iRule works automatically.

Borylo 's team found that the F5 partnership facilitated more than just the implementation process. "The F5 partnership with Symphoniq was one of the selling points that helped us push it through the budgeting

process," Borylo says. "Anytime you can leverage existing equipment, it makes upper management very happy."

Benefits

With TrueView implemented via BIG-IP LTM and iRules, the IT department can now troubleshoot issues as they arise with much greater speed and accuracy and far fewer resources in the past. It has also had the unexpected benefit of facilitating greater collaboration between the applications and network teams.

Fast, Efficient issue resolution

TrueView Express has had an immediate impact on American Century Investments' ability to track down and resolve performance issues. Having real user data on hand eliminates the guesswork for the IT department and enables them to zero in on issues and resolve them quickly and efficiently.

"Before, we'd get the dreaded 'the site is slow' call, and we'd pull together two people from my team, two people from the middleware team, a network person, a DBA, someone from the application side, and the next thing you know, we'd have 10 or 12 people on a conference call, and they'd spend three or four hours on it and come back with little or no information," Borylo explains. "Now we can collect the data we need with just a person or two in a matter of 15 to 20 minutes, and instead of digging through logs, we have actual user data."

Higher service levels

American Century Investments plans to extend TrueView to several more websites this year, both internal and external, where Borylo expects to realize the biggest benefits from the product. "Because TrueView can monitor basically any J2EE web-

based product, we're going to use it on quite a few of our homegrown applications that our fund managers use for research. We also plan to run it on our QA site so we can be proactive on our issues."

Borylo anticipates that when a customer complaint comes in, the IT team will be able to track that person's transaction, see what kind of error they experienced, find and fix the issue, and communicate back to the customer. It's the next step for the team in its effort to continually provide customers with ever-higher service levels.

Application collaboration

The benefits of TrueView and BIG-IP LTM extend well beyond the network-focused areas of the IT team. And the ability to monitor applications has brought about a fundamental change in the ways the infrastructure and applications teams work together.

"Now that the monitoring and the applications are all more integrated, the application areas are seeing that we can do more for them. So now we're being included in projects," explains Cindy Berry, Systems EC Infrastructure Specialist. "It's given us common ground for our infrastructure team to work with the applications team."

Berry has also seen a change in the way the applications teams think about BIG-IP LTM and iRules as they become more knowledgeable about them. She now gets calls asking about ways BIG-IP LTM can be used to address applications issues.

"Our application groups are actively looking at ways they can use this technology," Berry says. "They've really accepted it and see it as part of the basic set-up and everyday management of their application."

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