
Is Server Management Stressing Out IT?

Posted by meggebrecht - 2009/11/12 12:57

Midsized companies are spending an ungodly amount of time managing their servers, according to a new survey from hosting and cloud computing company Rackspace.

The results of the survey of almost 450 IT managers, conducted by research firm Loudhouse, aren't that surprising, given Rackspace's desire to see companies move to the cloud. But they are interesting.

According to the IT managers surveyed, 33 percent of their staff's time is spent on general server management, with another 26 percent spent troubleshooting server issues. And 58 percent of respondents said the "hassle of managing servers" is at least a moderate challenge for their companies, which have between 100 and 500 employees.

Server management is stressing out IT, according to the survey. Thirty-six percent complained of having to be available around the clock, with 35 percent citing hardware issues and maintenance as a gripe, and 34 percent pointing to after-hours calls and issues.

How do these findings line up with your IT department? Just how big a time drain is server management?

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Re: Is Server Management Stressing Out IT?

Posted by Bill Gerneglia - 2009/11/13 09:44

Anyone that has ever run a data center will attest to difficulties of keeping all servers up and running continuously. Upgrading operating systems, providing the latest patch to fix known bugs, backing up and restoring lost or corrupt files, providing disaster recovery services are all very time-consuming and nerve-racking. On top of maintaining the hardware and systems software you are also responsible for all of the applications and servers running on these machines. Database servers, Web Servers, Application Servers, firewalls, proxy servers, disk storage and array clustering are all time-sensitive and time-dependent crucial services.

After a while you tend to get to know the servers and treat them like needy spoiled children. If you do not pay close attention the problems do not go away - they are only magnified.

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Re: Is Server Management Stressing Out IT?

Posted by tomhoff - 2009/11/13 09:51

Although this report from Rackspace can be viewed as self-serving, it does help to underscore the inordinate amount of time that IT staffs spend maintaining and repairing server-related issues. Is this truly the best use of their time? I guess individual CIOs have to decide for themselves whether their organizations need to maintain their own servers and where some are compelled to meet regulatory or compliance requirements.

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Re: Is Server Management Stressing Out IT?

Posted by meggebrecht - 2009/11/13 10:26

Is this truly the best use of their time?

That's really a point that the Rackspace study tries to drive home. If your IT staff is spending 59 percent of its time with the servers, that doesn't leave a lot of time for strategic initiatives and innovation.

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Re: Is Server Management Stressing Out IT?

Posted by tomhoff - 2009/11/13 10:46

Exactly

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Re:ls Server Management Stressing Out IT?

Posted by Bill Wilson - 2009/11/18 09:47

You are correct but that professional server management comes at a premium prices. For example, Godaddy offers a new server running linux with all of the latest bells and whistles with sufficient RAM and RAID storage for about \$300 per month. The same server quoted at Rackspace was \$1700 per month. It does not take too many servers before you can justify a full time hire.

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Re:ls Server Management Stressing Out IT?

Posted by ckaiser - 2010/01/18 13:30

Ahh, server management. Or should I say server mismanagement? As a long-time server/ datacenter admin (and now consultant), my experience is that a great deal of the pain of server management is due to unqualified people working on them, lousy management practices when it comes to server administration, and failure to document, automate, and be proactive.

A well-built server, when properly designed, implemented, and maintained, will give years of almost trouble-free service. It's the human factor that causes the grief.

I've done a lot of datacenter work and have been a consultant to a variety of clients that manage server farms. I've seen well-run and disastrous. Trying to run a highly-available server farm on the cheap just isn't going to happen. The first requirement is good people. There are a lot of server admins out there who should never be allowed near anything with a keyboard. Too many companies also horizontally divide IT and eliminate any end-to-end responsibility. If an admin knows how to install windows but nothing about the application running on it, and the app tech doesn't know anything about how a server OS works, that server is never going to run right. And it takes a certain breed of troubleshooter and wizard to diagnose and properly repair server-related problems, too. Hiring the right type of person to run and maintain servers is critical. You have to pay them well and treat them well or they go somewhere else. But too many companies are content with dime-a-dozen so-called admins who can't troubleshoot a driver issue to save their lives.

Management has to be willing to spend some money on maintenance and make it a priority. Too many companies want IT to be a profit center and that's not realistic. Proactive monitoring is important, too. This one factor has made a significant difference in many of the clients I've seen. Those that had proactive monitoring could keep 5 9's uptime easily; those without it never could. When IT gets a phone call that says "I think the server is down", they have failed completely. As a server admin, I should always be the first to know there's a problem.

So let's take a hypothetical example. CompanyA has 25 servers at their single-site office. They have one server admin who used to build his own PCs and was the only one that knew enough to install MS Exchange. Their IT work consists of rebooting the servers when they crash, which is daily for some, weekly for others. They don't want to spend money to upgrade, implement monitoring, patch management, or define and document IT policies and procedures. So they decide to go to Rackspace for all their server needs. They're able to consolidate and get down to 15 servers instead of their current 25. So now they're paying \$25K per month to host those servers. "Wow. Our uptime is much better and our servers don't crash." Maybe that's because Rackspace is proactively monitoring them, maintaining them, documenting them, and hiring techs who know what they're doing? If they had implemented those same practices internally, their stuff would work well too. For a fraction of the money they spent on hosting, they could have educated their tech, implemented a monitoring system, and upgraded some of their old equipment.

Good server admins who understand and implement automation to keep things running can manage a staggering number of servers and still perform other tasks effectively. But it takes planning and ability. It must be proactive management. I consulted to a major financial institution bringing a subsidiary in-house. The subsidiary had 5 9's uptime for the previous 5 years due to our monitoring and proactive processes. During the migration I looked for the team that would take over the monitoring. I was stunned to find out there was none. "We have over a thousand servers. We can't proactively monitor each of them". There was nothing to say. Of course, their uptime was less than 90% corporate wide. Critical apps would go down for days at a time. I could implement a monitoring system that would end their reactive server management. But they're not interested. Their loss...

Another note about hosted server farms... While they definitely have their place, regulatory compliance issues (SOX, GLBA, HIPAA) can be formidable barriers to their use. Careful examination of what's stored there is critical to staying safe and legal. Even a webserver that just takes info and passes it on can be a huge risk if the data form caches aren't

cleared out often enough. Say your customer has to put in PII. Name, address, SSN for a credit check; How long is it OK for that data to sit on that hosted server? A second? A minute? An hour, A day? A week? You'd better know, because if it gets hacked and your info might have been compromised, you better have your ducks in a row.

The tools are there to efficiently run server farms and data centers, for everyone from the SBS folks to the enterprise datacenters. I contend that the fault is with the people, not the servers...

Re:ls Server Management Stressing Out IT?

Posted by sw134 - 2010/01/29 18:29

I can't agree more as I was just thinking the same thing. Server management is not really all that hard with a skilled staff and good management. It does have multiple problems when the people working on them are just qualified enough to navigate the systems. I have seen this on multiple occasions in many different industries.

On the opposing side even an excellent admin can't overcome inept management and thus budgets that will never get the job done. Money must be freed up to invest in management and monitoring solutions which enable the IT departments to fix the problems as they come and as quick as possible.

-sean

Re:ls Server Management Stressing Out IT?

Posted by ckaiser - 2010/01/30 10:14

Unfortunately, I think "inept management" is becoming all too common. A good admin will figure out ways to get around that. As a systems admin, my job is to work with whatever parameters I am given and make things work as well as possible. That often means going outside of "normal" best practices and making compromises that will allow things to work even if it's sub-optimal.

I think that it's important for admins to document their attempts to do it right and why they had to make any compromises, because if management is that inept, they're also likely to try to shift blame back to the admin when things blow up.

In the past, I think the admin's job had more to do with technical stuff, but these days there's a lot more of the balancing act trying to get things done with fewer resources.

Technical prowess is even more necessary now, though. A good admin just needs to be not only a tech wiz, but business savvy as well.

I totally agree that money has to come from somewhere to invest in IT infrastructure management. But it's SO hard to justify from an ROI standpoint. The returns on this type of IT spending are very nebulous; how can you say that investing in, let's say \$100K for an enterprise management implementation saved you X? If things go really well, you're trying to quantify failures that didn't happen. That makes it really tough. If you don't put it in, and your LOB app goes down for 2 days, you can say "we could have saved X if we had the monitoring" but you can't always prove it and it sounds like whining.

It really does take good management that knows and appreciates the value of proactivity (is that a word?) to implement these solutions.

I've built a variety of homegrown monitoring solutions that are cheaper than the big stuff, but in the end, you still need to implement and monitor, which costs money.

I've also noticed that monitoring doesn't scale well. What works for a small org doesn't scale up to a large one. So the tools change as you climb the scale.

Re:ls Server Management Stressing Out IT?

Posted by pgalen - 2010/02/16 08:39

I agree, spending on Enterprise Management Solutions is often difficult to justify, but the cost of downtime or improperly configured servers or poorly running core applications within an organization tell the experience IT pro that these are investments that need to be made. Anyone that has ever "owned" the data center and the servers and apps that run on them can attest to the stress levels brought on by this ownership. The servers and apps are like children, they need

constant attention, without which you will suffer bigger problems in the future.

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Re:Is Server Management Stressing Out IT?

Posted by srw134 - 2010/02/17 02:20

One thing I learn as a consultant as their will always be companies who want to get by with less only to hire people like me to fix it. If they would only stick to some simple principles they would save money and put many consultancies out of business. This however will not happen any time soon.

-sean

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Re:Is Server Management Stressing Out IT?

Posted by sediga - 2010/02/28 15:17

I think server management ties to the type of organization. None IT-based companies or organizations do not believe in IT spending when they start. If the business takes off, they realize that IT is in fact required, and they race to fix up the mess.

I have across a number of situations where the business owners look at me funny when I tell them about server management and IT infrastructure. A year later, long and behold, I get a call to come and fix the mess.

IT-based companies, however, start on the right foot " at least the ones with some experience.

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Re:Is Server Management Stressing Out IT?

Posted by srw134 - 2010/03/04 15:41

Well, all I can say is without this ignorance on managements part consultants would be hard pressed to find a job. But as a currently and future consultant I look forward to their mistakes ;-).

-sean

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Re:Is Server Management Stressing Out IT?

Posted by alvinperez - 2012/07/31 19:12

Hello..
The information you added in this post is new to me. I was not aware about it. I am glad i visited here and gathered huge info on it. Thanks ..

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