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A better monitor for your mission-critical Exchange environment

Microsoft SCOM is impressive, but it's too complex for first-line responders. Luckily, there's a better option

If the phones in your office stopped working, would your company still be able to function? What about faxes and postal mail? Chances are your business processes would be delayed to a certain degree if these services were down, but your daily business functions would not come to a grinding halt.

If I ask the same question about Internet and email service, I think most folks would agree: If your company's messaging system goes down and employees cannot communicate, either internally with colleagues or externally with clients and prospects, then they might as well just go home -- and update their résumés.

[Learn more about the lineup of System Center tools by reading J. Peter Bruzzese's "System Center is more than just a buzzword." | Keep up to date on Windows PC and server issues in InfoWorld's Technology: Windows newsletter.]

In the past 15 years, the business community has seen a steady shift in the way organizations communicate and, thus, function. Phones, faxes, and letters are all important, but they are no longer integral when it comes to keeping your business in business.

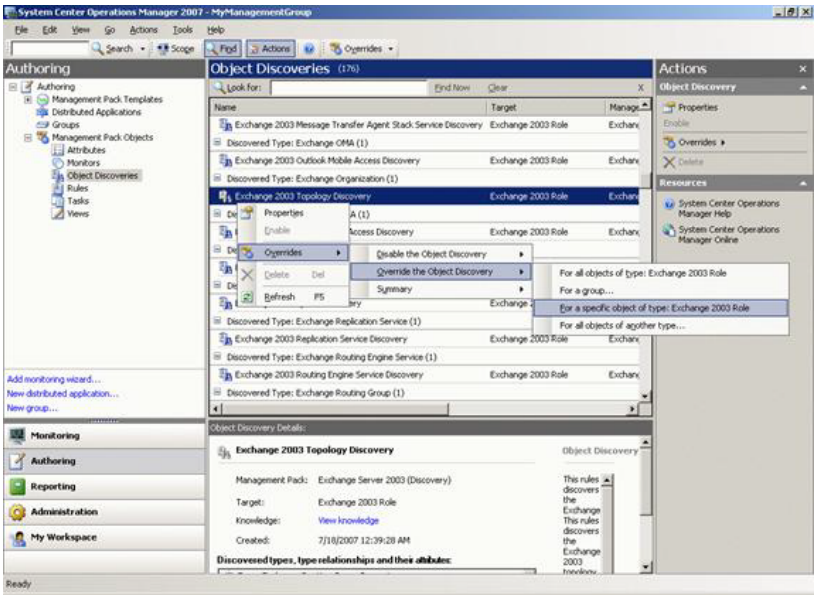
It's obvious that Microsoft Exchange is mission-critical; no one would disagree with that. Most would also agree that in our economy, administrators are being asked to do more with less -- so the key is to be proactive about monitoring. Be ready for a problem before or at the moment it hits, and make sure even your lower-level admins or help desk can see the problem even if they aren't authorized to handle it directly.

Microsoft SCOM: A capable tool that's too hard to use

The key to keeping your business in business is to have a solid monitoring solution in play. As a Microsoft loyalist, my instinct is to lead people to System Center Operations Manager, or SCOM, formerly known as the catchier MOM. Despite my negative experiences with Microsoft's System Center tools in general (don't get me started on my Data Protection Manager nightmare), I look at SCOM somewhat favorably because of my positive experiences getting MOM up and running in the past. SCOM is a robust monitoring solution, and you can implement management packs for your various servers (like Exchange) to give you more reach and a more watchful eye over your Exchange environment.

So why do I view SCOM only somewhat favorably? Because SCOM is still too complex. I'm looking for a monitoring solution that doesn't require a doctorate degree to implement. And it's not just me: I've heard feedback from many organizations that struggle to implement SCOM due to its complex nature.

A typical SCOM deployment can take a few weeks or even longer for an organization that has several hundred mailboxes. While this may not be an issue for enterprise organizations, small to medium-size businesses usually lack the time, money, and staff necessary to implement the software. SCOM may seem very appealing when looking at the cost of the software alone, but you should also factor in the expense of implementing it and training your staff how to effectively use it.



Microsoft's Systems Center Operations Manager

At first, SCOM looks to be cheap because you can implement the Operations Manager server for a little over $500, and for just under $1,500, you can implement SCOM 2007 R2 with SQL. However, SCOM 2007 R2 requires a Windows Server license for each management server and a management license for each managed operating system environment; you are looking at paying for MLs for each server you monitor, too.

Every time I work with SCOM, though, I can't help but ask myself if the first point of contact in an organization -- typically, your help desk -- will be able to use it. Will the average help desk operator on your staff be able to use whatever solution you implement? My experience with SCOM says no, because it is designed for the back-end administrator. While I find SCOM to be a very comprehensive tool, it's not an easy, out-of-the-box solution to implement, and it isn't a good tool for your frontline help desk folks that need monitoring to be geared toward for immediate problem detection on those Exchange servers (as well as other servers).

Mailscape: A simpler, just-as-capable frontline monitoring tool

Recently, I encountered a product that takes a unique approach to helping administrators keep their email servers up and running. It's called Mailscape, and it's an Exchange systems management tool developed by ENow, a consultancy that helps companies implement or migrate to the latest version of Microsoft Exchange server.

I like Mailscape -- though one reason, I have to admit, is because the monitoring dashboard looks really cool, like a "Star Trek" tablet board with red and green lights. You can never go wrong with red and green lights because everyone knows when things are good (green), declining (yellow for warning), or bad (red).

Mailscape's dashboard

The layout of the dashboard contains the key components of the messaging system, along with complementary areas such as the operating system and Active Directory. Similar to SCOM, Mailscape also performs synthetic transactions that test whether the key services Exchange delivers are functioning correctly. This includes core functionality like Outlook Web Access, ActiveSync, Outlook Anywhere, BlackBerry, and mail flow. If any of these tests fail, the dashboard lights up and the IT team can then quickly address the issue.

In addition to Mailscape's simplicity and ease-of-use, it also provides cool reports. Mailscape comes more than 165 built-in reports, and you can customize and deliver them to users in a myriad of ways.

The reporting engine allows you to easily create very complex dispatches. It gives you the ability to use almost any object in Active Directory, including organizational units, groups, user custom, and built-in property fields. In addition, you can link the Active Directory filters to other objects such as mailboxes, databases, servers, and mobile devices. For example, creating a report of inactive BlackBerry devices for a manager is very simple.

Traditional reporting products give you the ability to email reports to people, whereas Mailscape not only provides this capability but also provides an option to give each user their own Web dashboard to view their reports. The dashboards automatically update so that new reports do not have to be manually sent. These personalized dashboards can also provide each key person or teams in an organization with their own view that contains only the reports or monitored servers that person or team needs to see.

I'm curious what you are using to monitor your environment -- specifically, your Exchange environment. What do you think about your current solution?

This article, *"**A better monitor for your mission-critical Exchange environment**," originally appeared at **InfoWorld.com**. Read more of **J. Peter Bruzzese's Enterprise Windows blog** and follow the latest developments in **Windows** at InfoWorld.com.*