



Integrating Network Security and Performance

Why an integrated approach is essential



Introduction:

As Internet threats increase, organisations must build defences to protect employees, productivity, and data. Yet, at the same time, on-demand applications, remote resources, and on-line content usage are at an all-time high, requiring better performance from network infrastructure and Internet circuits.

Network administrators must implement a broader set of security features and simultaneously improve application performance to meet the needs of the organisation. This introduces major challenges as the implementation of numerous security platforms increases network latency, interface management, and troubleshooting complexity. Additionally, treating Internet security and performance as opposing functions eliminates any hope of diagnosing Internet data stream issues or correlating the events that impact security and performance.

Why security and performance must receive equal attention on corporate networks:

1. Most multiple/blended threat management approaches create latency.

A recent article published by Network World points out the incredible latency introduced by popular Unified Threat Management (UTM) devices, stating, “It’s not uncommon for the UTM products on the market today to suffer as much as a 50% loss in performance...”¹

Most UTM solutions on the market function similarly to the disparate devices they attempt to replace. Simply put, these devices process packets at least one time for every threat they attempt to stop. By scanning once for spyware, once for viruses, once for unsafe URLs, once for inappropriate content, once for infected file transfers, and so on, gateway throughput diminishes significantly.

2. Security issues often only become apparent when they impact committed service levels.

Organisations often don’t discover security issues until they impact performance and access to on-line resources. For example, spyware protection recently has become high priority to network administrators primarily because of the impact it has on productivity. In 2005, market intelligence firm IDC estimated that spyware issues represented 30% of all help desk calls.² Organisations benefit greatly when Internet circuit performance is monitored along with security breaches. Network administrators should look for solutions that report on Internet circuit performance, producing alerts when service levels drop below committed levels.

3. Layer 7 shaping provides true insight and control over the user experience.

The legacy approach of port-based application rate limiting or threat blocking is no longer sufficient for delivering an effective user experience. Blended threats and mission-critical applications may now share common ports and function similarly to HTTP or HTTPS traffic. QoS tags may also be insufficient for VoIP calls that don’t rely on MLPS queuing. For this reason, gateway security devices and application shaping appliances should share at least one major attribute in common: Layer 7 application recognition and control.

By implementing Layer 7 application recognition and control and co-ordinating it with other networking communications attributes, organisations can identify packet attributes and then set policies on those attributes, creating a more productive user experience. For example, only a solution that can identify Layer 7 application attributes (when co-ordinating other network communications attributes) can identify and stop or filter non-port 80 HTTP traffic, a common approach of using proxy anonymisers to bypass Internet content filtering policies.

4. Integrated policy management

Network security, access, and application policies vary by department, group, job function, and even individual. While traditionally viewed as disparate, security, access, and application policies should actually complement one another for both management and efficiency. Administrators should implement solutions that deliver Internet policy management tools with application bandwidth, Internet content, time-of-day, threat, and access policy features integrated into a single interface. This approach allows administrators to manage the Internet data stream by user/group, application, and threat.

5. Event correlation of disparate Internet and network events

When Internet performance is slow, how do you find out what's causing it and how do you start troubleshooting? Most network administrators look immediately to on-line connection speed tests, IDS/IPS reports, traffic logs, and even packet sniffers to identify problem areas. While these traditional approaches can yield results, it's often difficult to identify the root cause of performance issues. For example, poor Internet performance is often a symptom of spyware infection. The infected device uses its Internet connection to run "zombie" processes like calling home to transfer data or even pass data through other infected machines.

But, when such infectious activity appears as HTTP traffic, how is an administrator to identify and correct the issue? An integrated approach to security and performance should provide true event correlation for troubleshooting the problem. In this case, when performance stalls, the administrator would check real-time reports showing total upload and download volumes, drill down to identify the top bandwidth consumers, and then verify the applications used by those machines or individuals. Through Layer 7 application identification, the administrator would quickly see the spyware/zombie traffic and have the control to immediately stop data transfer from that machine—either by application (spyware) or by total traffic. Within moments, performance would be restored and the administrator could tend to cleaning the infected machine. With true event correlation, the administrator would also be able to identify what activity caused the spyware infection and where it came from to establish preventative policies and prevent future infections.

6. Data-driven decision making

Disparate systems generate separate reports and often produce conflicting data. Although savvy administrators may be able to deduce causes of performance issues and security breaches, such work is often time consuming and fails to deliver effective reports for communicating with management. According to the Standish Group, only 29% of IT projects finish on time and on budget. It's no wonder administrators are looking for better data. By integrating security solutions with performance solutions, administrators can generate better data about what's really happening with their Internet connection and communicate their decisions to management.

7. Users, applications, and threats will always demand more resources.

Users and groups of users will always attempt to download, upload, and use larger and larger files. Applications work on a first-come, first-served basis and demand sufficient resources to function. As applications become more complex, more resources are required. Threats come with connectivity, so if you're connected to the Internet, you have to deal with them. Unfortunately threats also use connectivity resources. The new breed of spyware/adware/malware threats consume bandwidth resources that mission-critical applications need to function.

When it comes to calculating bandwidth circuit requirements for any particular organisation, there are some time-proven concepts to consider. Know that buying more bandwidth is never a permanent solution to performance issues. As connectivity resources increase, users, applications, and threats will quickly fill the gap. Administrators must implement policies to manage user access to content and application priority, and stop threats from impacting resources. Also, implementing policies with a unified Internet data stream control device is more effective and cost efficient than attempting to manage multiple disparate security and performance devices.

Gateway threat management tools, whether single-purpose or blended, help organisations become more protected from both internal and external threats. Application performance solutions increase organisations' ability to prioritise mission-critical information. However, by combining security with application performance, organisations can correlate isolated events and more easily identify and control the problems created when users, applications, and threats compete for network resources.

References:

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