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Vendors strive to automate wireless LAN troubleshooting and management

By Jessica Scarpati, News Writer
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As wireless LANs evolve from being a convenience to a primary means of network access for enterprises, IT managers have learned that anything can go wrong – a potted plant is moved, someone uses the kitchen microwave – and that troubleshooting has become a resource-sucking guessing game.

Vendors are well aware of this problem. Step by step, they are adding management capabilities to their products that will make wireless LAN management and troubleshooting more automatic.

For instance, Aerohive Networks, the Santa Clara, Calif.-based company known for its decentralized and controller-free approach to wireless architecture, announced two new features this week for its wireless LAN infrastructure – Performance Sentinel and Airtime Boost – that allow IT administrators to see when clients dip below established service-level agreements (SLAs) and automatically correct the problem with more airtime.

"What all the vendors have begun to do is try to add features to improve that performance," said Paul DeBeasi, a senior analyst at the Burton Group. "It's not like this one capability is going to be an 'ah-ha' moment."

Automating wireless LAN troubleshooting

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DeBeasi said the move toward more automatic systems in products such as Aerohive's has grown with "gradual accumulation" over the past 18 months.

"People are going to wake up one day and say, 'Wow, you know, it's easier to manage this network now,'" he said. "All of these capabilities are going to help drive the acceleration of wireless into the enterprise ... as mission critical."

For network engineers like Norman Elton, an Aerohive customer who has 5,000 students coming back to campus this fall at William and Mary College in Williamsburg, Va., having a "thousand-foot view of the performance of the network" is invaluable, he said.

"If a student calls up and says, 'My wireless is slow,' that's really, really tricky to troubleshoot," Elton said.

Typically, he has to send an engineer out with a laptop to try to reproduce the problem. "[Aerohive's new features] will, hopefully, be able to say, 'Every time clients connect to this particular AP or this particular dorm, their wireless suffers,'" he said.

Improving wireless LAN management in baby steps

Although new features such as Aerohive's give network managers a more granular look into network behavior than was available before, the move seems to be more of a baby step than a huge leap toward greater wireless LAN control.

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Craig Mathias, principal analyst of the Farpoint Group, said he expected that vendors will increasingly focus on "the management end of things, greater visibility and easier control." Aerohive's product is "a very significant development" toward making wireless as consistent as wired networks, he said.

"For a long time in the wireless world, we focused on radio.... The really important innovations are going to come from other parts of the system," Mathias said. "We're 20 years into the wireless revolution, but there really is still so much that needs to be

done."

But the challenge of managing a wireless LAN is what's made innovations more measured, said Adam Conway, Aerohive's vice president of product management.



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"The difficulty of Wi-Fi is that [it] is incredibly complex," Conway said. "When you plug into a port on a switch or a router, you get what the port says. If it's 100 megabytes per second, you get 100 megabytes per second."

"There are a bunch of variables [in wireless LANs] that can contribute to a much more complex landscape than plugging in a switch," he added.

"On a wired network, just throwing bandwidth at the problem solved this performance problem for most people," DeBeasi said. "For a wireless network, that's a little difficult.... Throughput is a shared resource, and you don't have enough of it."

Tackling wireless LAN management from different angles

Some vendors have tried other technologies, such as [airtime fairness and beamforming](#), to tackle the issue, DeBeasi said.

Meanwhile, wireless network administrators have been in reactive mode, troubleshooting problems after end users have already felt their effects. Few network administrators have any idea whether wireless LAN issues are tied to SLAs or something else, Conway said. A client could have a slow connection because of an overloaded access point or a virus in a laptop, he said.

Aerohive claims its newest software will be able to track every access point across a network and determine how many clients fall out of SLA compliance, how badly, at what time and for how long, and will temporarily reallocate airtime to heal the problem.

Through the software, network administrators specify the minimum throughput for a client group on the network, Conway said. Any time a client falls below that threshold, the software will take a "negligible" portion of airtime away from those who are in compliance, effectively loaning it to those who need it, he said.

"It allows us to deliver, essentially, a guaranteed throughput to clients," Conway said. "The system will adjust to get you there."

Aerohive will offer Performance Sentinel and Airtime Boost free of charge to customers through upgrades of its HiveOS 3.4 and HiveManager 3.4 software.

Let us know what you think about the story; email: [Jessica Scarpati, News Writer](mailto:Jessica.Scarpati@News-Writer)

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