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Start-Ups Aim to Help Tame Corporate Data

New Services Give IT Professionals Google-Like Abilities to Search Complex Systems, Growing Piles of Information

By PUI-WING TAM

Several technology start-ups are bringing Google-like search capabilities to companies so information-technology professionals can better search through their complex IT systems and growing mounds of data.

While consumers have long been able to use search engines like Google, Yahoo and Ask.com to find everything from obscure Web sites to travel deals on the Internet, there have been few similar tools for companies to search the increasing amounts of traffic generated by server computers and other devices and to look through their "unstructured" data, which includes video and pictures.

That's partly because most companies wall off their IT infrastructures and their data for security and compliance reasons. Many companies also use a hodge-podge of technology from providers such as International Business Machines Corp., Hewlett-Packard Co. and Dell Inc., among others. That means there's typically no uniform technology to search through and numerous security hurdles to overcome.

Now several start-ups are aiming to help companies perform better searches of their data and machines, especially as the number of servers and the amount of data at enterprises balloons. The new services, which are typically aimed at the corporate IT departments, rather than at the typical company employee, also generally cost less than the software and services provided by large technology vendors like IBM and H-P.

Depending on how much data the technology searches or how many machines a company has, sometimes the new technologies cost just hundreds of dollars a month, rather than hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Rachel Chalmers, an analyst at research firm 451 Group in San Francisco, says there's a growing need for companies to "harness their big data" and mine the information that they have. Companies also need to better understand how their IT infrastructures function for maintenance and security reasons, she adds. "These are traditionally intractable problems for the enterprise," she says.

Among the start-ups aiming to help fill that gap is Splunk Inc., a San Francisco company that offers technology that crawls servers and other devices. The technology then indexes all the machine traffic and makes it searchable for a customer. Paglo Labs Inc., Menlo Park, Calif., meanwhile, sells an online search-based service that lets companies manage their computers, networks and applications.

"We've seen phenomenal growth recently, with our growth doubling between 2007 and 2009," says Godfrey Sullivan, Splunk's chief executive, though he didn't provide specific figures.

Hyper9 Inc., Austin, Texas, makes technology to search "virtual" servers -- those that use "virtualization" software to boost the number of programs they can run.

Many of the new technologies not only do a search, but also give companies a way to cull information to improve their IT systems. At Macy's Inc., for instance, the Macys.com and Bloomingdales.com Web sites began using Splunk's technology three years ago, says Ratnakar Lavu, group vice president of technology for the sites.

At the time, Macys.com was growing rapidly, and its number of servers jumped to 60 from five. That made it difficult for Mr. Lavu's IT team to manually monitor each machine, leading him to buy Splunk's products to see across all 60 servers, he says.

Instead, Mr. Lavu entered in a query to Splunk's software. Within minutes, the technology scanned the indexed information from all 60 servers and highlighted how there had been a pattern of errors across some servers. In two days, the problem was resolved, says Mr. Lavu.

"It would've taken us quite a while without Splunk because it was a very complex problem to solve," says Mr. Lavu. "It's Google-like and identifies patterns though search."



Splunk: The offices of Splunk, a San Francisco company offering technology that crawls servers and other devices.

Still, the technologies are relatively nascent and many of the start-ups have fewer than 20 employees, which can make larger companies reluctant to test out their wares. Mr. Lavu says there are also some concerns that the technologies won't be as effective if the amount of data and machines they have to scan keeps growing, though he adds that he hasn't experienced that himself.

Most of the start-ups charge an annual subscription fee for their service, or an upfront fee plus an annual maintenance cost. Splunk's fee is based on how much data it has to scan and index, while Paglo levies a fee of \$1 a device per month that its technology has to crawl and search.

For George Burden, a systems administrator at Benewah Medical Center in Plummer, Idaho, such pricing is a good deal. Mr. Burden says he began using Paglo's technology to search the medical center's 20 server computers and other machines earlier this year for just \$200 a month. The technology allows him to keep track of when a server is failing without having to check each machine himself everyday.

"The technology searches through my IT network constantly and gives us a complete inventory," he says. "We have to be able to notify people when the system is down, rather than be reactive."

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