

NetIQ - Microsoft IT Case Study

Executive Summary

Industry

Founded in 1975, Microsoft is the worldwide leader in software, services and Internet technologies for personal and business computing. The company offers a wide range of products and services designed to empower people through great software—any time, any place and on any device.

Business Situation

Deploying Active Directory with either Windows 2000 or Windows 2003 involves utilizing Group Policy Objects (GPOs) throughout the enterprise for managing and maintaining Active Directory security. With hundreds of potential settings, GPOs provide a highly granular tool for setting and implementing user and desktop policies. Microsoft's Information Technology Group (Microsoft IT) leverages hundreds of GPO settings to ensure flexibility and policy compliance in managing tens of thousands of users worldwide in its complex Enterprise environment.

However, centralized policy management with GPOs requires an automated change management process as the number of users grows within Active Directory. Specifically, Microsoft IT required tools that could automatically track and manage GPO changes and ensure accountability for policy compliance. Microsoft IT selected NetIQ Group Policy Administrator to help manage the GPO change process and ensure that GPO changes were planned, tracked, and approved offline before being placed into production.

Benefits

NetIQ Group Policy Administrator enables Microsoft IT to eliminate time-consuming manual procedures for tracking and staging GPO changes that typically required two or more full time administrators. NetIQ Group Policy Administrator helps to streamline IT operations and satisfy regulatory compliance requirements. The NetIQ Group Policy Administrator advantage: Making policy changes in a centralized repository for staging, review, and approval prior to deployment.

NetIQ Helps Microsoft Information Technology Group Streamline Change Management for Group Policy Objects

Managing Group Policy Objects (GPOs) is critical to maintaining Active Directory security. Microsoft's Information Technology Group uses NetIQ Group Policy Administrator to assist in the challenge of managing GPO changes while satisfying general audit and change management policy compliance.

Challenges of GPO Change Management

Within Microsoft IT, the Identity Management Team is responsible for deploying and maintaining GPOs for Active Directory, servicing tens of thousands of users worldwide. Microsoft IT identified two critical processes that would lead to successful Group Policy implementation—automated health monitoring and change management. Automated health monitoring was easily implemented with Microsoft Operations Manager and product Management Packs, and NetIQ was chosen to provide GPO change management.

Given the centralized control and enterprise-wide impact of GPO changes, the Identity Management Team had initially instituted a manual process that utilized two or more administrators to perform, audit and report on all GPO changes. However, as GPO changes multiplied over time, this manual process using spreadsheets and email communications proved too labor-intensive and prone to human error.

Working with Michael Dennis, the Lead Program Manager for the Group Policy development team at Microsoft, NetIQ Group Policy Administrator was developed to address the need for a holistic change management solution. “NetIQ Group Policy Administrator embraces and extends the Group Policy management capabilities in Active Directory. NetIQ Group Policy Administrator provides valuable capabilities to ensure the proper change management and auditing of Group Policy for Microsoft IT and anyone else using Microsoft’s Active Directory,” Dennis said.

Automating GPO Change Management Workflow

One of the key issues for Microsoft IT was ensuring that no GPO modifications would be made in real time. The intent was to enable IT managers to understand how policy changes would affect settings in the user environment before changes were deployed. By assessing any change impact in advance, the Identity Management Team in Microsoft IT has been able to avoid changes that might adversely affect their systems.

“One of our key requirements for change management was to deter unanticipated and prevent unauthorized changes in Active Directory,” said Mark Lawrence, Group Program Manager for Identity Management Team. “NetIQ Group Policy Administrator offers solutions to GPO change request, assessment, approval, notification and auditing—all required components of our business processes. Moreover, we needed to lock-down the number of staff making changes to GPOs in Active Directory, and NetIQ Group Policy Administrator is a solution to this need.”

For example, to test a proposed GPO change before deployment:

- A comparison report in NetIQ Group Policy Administrator enables an IT administrator to quickly determine what settings have changed and re-verify his work to ensure that no unexpected settings are being pushed into production.
- A built-in, customizable workflow notification process ensures that proper procedures are followed before any GPO changes are deployed, saving time and streamlining the approval process.
- The NetIQ Group Policy Administrator role (delegation) model allows Microsoft IT to segregate responsibilities for GPO change management. This allows Microsoft IT to specify a list of users, authorized to make changes to GPOs in NetIQ Group Policy Administrator, and a separate list of users who can authorize changes in NetIQ Group Policy Administrator prior to exporting them to Active Directory.

In addition, the team needed to make changes and document them in a dedicated repository so that a clear change history was recorded and easily accessible for review. NetIQ Group Policy Administrator provides automated version control and complete history of GPO changes made over time, and includes the ability to run differential and comparison reports. If changes are identified that need correction, NetIQ Group Policy Administrator also enables a GPO rollback when necessary.

Key Advantages for GPO Change Simulation and Change Management

NetIQ Group Policy Administrator enables those responsible for Group Policy to implement a consistent and controlled Group Policy change simulation and management process that helps ensure the integrity of the Active Directory environment. Specifically, NetIQ Group Policy Administrator supports and extends the online management of Microsoft's Group Policy Management Console (GPMC) native controls with an offline change simulation capability that tests GPO changes prior to implementation. In addition, NetIQ Group Policy Administrator optimizes the GPO change management process with unique documentation and notification capabilities. NetIQ Group Policy Administrator provides an immediate return on investment for those seeking to implement new or improve existing GPO change simulation and change management processes.

A Working Collaboration

Odin Anderson and Brian Davies, members of the Microsoft IT Identity Management team, worked closely with NetIQ in the requirements definition and design of NetIQ Group Policy Administrator version 4.5, which was released in October 2004. NetIQ Group Policy Administrator 4.5 provides significant enhancements to enterprise compliance reporting and change management.

For example, the team wanted a way to verify that standard GPOs were synchronized across multiple domains. NetIQ Group Policy Administrator 4.5 Enterprise Consistency Check automates this task and allows this task to be scheduled during off hours. "We have multiple domains and multiple GPOs in those domains so the task of comparing GPOs one at a time is an extremely tedious task," said Anderson. "This report dramatically reduces the time required to audit and report on the integrity of standard security and configuration policies."

In addition, the team spent a significant amount of time each week compiling GPO change information for auditing and reporting needs and wanted the ability to automatically generate operational change reports. NetIQ Group Policy Administrator 4.5 Point-In-Time Analysis automates this process and makes it possible to optionally attach a daily or weekly report listing all GPO changes instead. Point-In-Time Analysis provides answers to the following questions:

- What did my Group Policy environment look like yesterday? A week ago?
- How many GPO changes were made through NetIQ Group Policy Administrator over the past week?
- Who made GPO changes through NetIQ Group Policy Administrator over the past 3 days and what did they change?
- With NetIQ Group Policy Administrator 4.5, I can more easily audit and report on operational changes," Davies said. "Point-In-Time Analysis enables us to provide IT Management increased visibility into Group Policy change management requirements."

Microsoft plans on continuing their successful working relationship with NetIQ to define additional enhancements to NetIQ Group Policy Administrator that enable increased discipline around Group Policy change management and operational efficiency improvements for IT organizations.

“As a world-class IT organization, Microsoft IT must ensure it has the necessary tools in place to facilitate change management and deliver on the service level expectations of our customers,” Michelle Beaulieu, Service Manager for Identity Management, added. “NetIQ Group Policy Administrator provides an automated tool for managing Group Policy changes in Active Directory that disciplines the GPO change management process and enables us to satisfy audit and reporting requirements”

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