Automation, IT Efficiency Key VSA Benefits for University of Kentucky Research

Research Information Services (RIS) at the University of Kentucky has been using Kaseya for seven years. In the early days, the IT automation aspects of VSA helped the organization replace its "sneaker net" approach with efficient remote management of its 400-plus computers.

Over the years, the group has embraced more VSA capabilities, including the service desk, security features, and other aspects. In this case study, we'll cover the top 11 benefits the university research group has gained from VSA and touch on the new features offered in VSA 9.4.

We talked to Steve Creager, who has been using Kaseya VSA for over half a decade. Creager is responsible for managing over 400 computers, and at the same time creating a better infrastructure and continually improving the end-user experience. Kaseya VSA, and the latest version VSA 9.4, is a big part of that effort.

1. Meeting and Tightening SLAs

Not all IT departments have service level agreements (SLAs). These are a sign of confidence in the efficiency of IT operations. Creager's group has SLAs and is looking at making them more aggressive with the help of VSA and its statistics function. Creager noted, "It lets us go back and check to see if our SLAs are being met. Keep in mind we are a small group. As part of University of Kentucky Research group, we take care of 400-plus computers and 27 servers. In addition to the support group, which I oversee, we have a programming group, which consists of four additional staff members that are also using Kaseya. This allows us to look at their tickets to ensure that they are meeting their SLAs and allows us to see where issues are and work to correct them."

Now RIS is planning to support more stringent SLAs. "We have a framework for our SLAs— what we want them to be and the metrics involved. Kaseya's service desk allows us to set up SLAs to email us if a ticket is not meeting an SLA and the tech working on that ticket will be notified. We're looking forward to using the service desk to enhance our SLA framework," Creager said.

"With its automation, we can solve problems more quickly than we would have been able to do without VSA. One of the things that we have liked about Kaseya VSA from the beginning is that it makes our life, as a support group, a lot easier for us and allows us to support our end users better."

2. Supporting In-House Programs

The university's RIS group has a programming staff that builds custom software. VSA is a big help in supporting this software. Creager said it helps them be more productive. "If the end user has an issue, they can create a ticket in to Kaseya and that ticket is assigned to the appropriate programmer. It helps them structure their day better, so they are not having to answer phone calls from end users. In the past, it has been if an issue with an in-house program came up, the end user would call the programmer up directly and sometimes the call is missed. The ticket queue allows them to be more structured and able to plan their day," Creager explained.

3. The New World of Remote Control

With VSA 9.4, admins can work with their end points whether they have a Kaseya agent installed or not. "We like that we can now control a machine that does not have a Kaseya agent on it. This is a great feature to have. We can now send an email to the end user, who may be out in the field, at home, or at a conference, or who is using a non-departmental

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Research Information Services (RIS) exists to support the computing, networking and communications infrastructure as well as maintain the technology budget for the areas under the Vice President for Research. The IS staff provides applications programming, database and Web services, and server and desktop support and troubleshooting to the Research staff, the Graduate School and the Office of Technology Commercialization.

computer but needs access to files or programs within our group. This lets us log in, work on their computer, and get their problem corrected," Creager said.

This kind of support was a bit trickier before VSA 9.4. "We normally had to go through a third-party piece of software, or the user had to bring their computer in prior to them going to a conference for us to ensure that the software has been updated and that the computer was in working condition. It is more flexible to send an email out and say, 'Click on this, we'll log in and take care of the issue.'"

4. Universal Search

Kaseya VSA offers universal search to automatically discover assets on the network. "Universal search allows us to find a computer name or an IP address faster. If we are notified that a computer is blocked due to an infringement issue, we can enter that IP address into the universal search and find that computer a lot faster as opposed to having to go through each group," Creager said.

5. Service and Help with a Smile

As technical support manager, Creager is adamant about taking care of end users. VSA helps in that effort. "We have had staff that have worked within our research departments before that have transferred out to another group tell us that they liked our type of support better," Creager said. "Kaseya VSA allows us to be able to enhance our support to our end users."

6. The Beauty of Proactivity

With VSA's ability to automate IT functions, RIS can stay ahead of issues. "One of the things that our end users like about us using Kaseya is we can be more proactive in giving them help. Software and OS patching is scheduled at night when they are not at their desk. This allows the end user to be more productive throughout the day without a support technician having to take time away from them to manually update their computer," Creager said. "Being proactive is a good thing. No one wants to spend their day putting out fires all the time. The more you can be proactive, the more you can stop fires from even starting. VSA allows me to do that."

7. Tracking Change Management

VSA's service desk is key for monitoring IT changes at RIS. "We use the service desk for our change management group. We meet once a week to go over any changes made to our in-house software programs, computer hardware changes, as well as changes to our servers," Creager explained. "The implementation of the change management took a little bit of buy-in for some of our staff, but it allows us to keep track of the status of all our software and systems. The fact that Kaseya VSA has this build in makes it a win-win for us."

These changes encompass many issues. "It could be service failure that's outside of normal business hours, a server that has to be down due to a power outage on campus, a server outage due to hardware failure, any type of error or corruption of our SQL servers, or any critical server updates that might come down and affect any of our in-house programs. We also have what we call our preauthorized changes. These are changes that are automatically authorized, but we still need to be logged to inform the group."

8. IT Tool Consolidation Brings Efficiency, Savings

Kaseya VSA offers a plentitude of features, enough features that RIS replaced five separate IT solutions with VSA. "We went from five different programs down to one with Kaseya. We have 400-plus computers but only one and a half techs assigned to take care of those. The more automation we can get, the better we like it," Creager said.

9. The New World of IT Automation and Policies

VSA is all about turning manual IT tasks into automated functions. RIS applies IT automation to many areas. "IT automation helps with patch management, and the policy management module helps us standardize everything instead of individually having to add each new computer to the appropriate group," Creager said. "We have 10 different settings that each

Business Challenge

- Ensure students, researchers and faculty have the tools and information they need to complete research projects on time and under budget.
- Provide IT services to a research organization spread out over 45 different locations across campus.
- Decrease IT costs while improving the quality of IT services in the face of tighter budgets.
- Remotely access and control systems deployed behind the university's medical center firewall while remaining within HIPAA compliance.

Key Benefits

- Remote IT systems management is consolidated through a Web-based dashboard, streamlining and integrating disparate management functions on a single pane of glass at a lower price point.
- Repetitive tasks are automated through scripting and agent procedures, saving hours—even days—for RIS technicians.
- IT services are aligned with the organization's business procedures through ITIL best practices, ensuring RIS is meeting the needs of users.
- Greater visibility into the IT environment and accurate auditing features eliminate the need to overprovision hardware procurement and software licenses, saving thousands of dollars each year.

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Steve Creager

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computer needs to have (i.e., patch scans, disk space remaining, and OS patch updates). Instead of having to do it all manually for each new computer, we assign that policy to that machine, click a button and we're done."

10. Fewer Setup Errors

Having a standardized, policy-based setup, means things are right the first time. "There are no errors because once you set it up the first time, you're good to go and it's across the board. Even if you have to make a change to a policy, you know how to push that change out across all of your computer systems," Creager said.

11. The Freedom to Think Strategically

IT automation means that manual functions are now done for overworked admins. That time savings means IT pros can focus on what really matters. "Even though I'm the tech support manager, I'm the one-half of the tech that goes along with our other tech position. In the past, before doing more automation, my one-half designation was more like three-quarters. I spent more time on the support side than the manager side. Automation has freed time up for me to move back to what I should be doing, being more of a manger as opposed to being more of a tech," Creager said. "I'm now able to manage the infrastructure more to allow the end users a more carefree environment. When they come in in the morning, they know their computer is going to turn on, it's going to be updated, and they're not going to have any issues."

Even training a new RIS technician is now a snap. "The interface is so intuitive that training for temporary personnel is almost nil. We can set them down in front of the Kaseya VSA software, and within 10 minutes they're using it to complete tickets," Creager said.

'Wish I'd Done that Sooner'

We asked Creager if in hindsight he would have done anything differently regarding VSA. "We would have used the Service Desk from day one as opposed to just using the ticketing module. The ticketing module was used for about three years before we switched to the Service Desk—the Service Desk gives us a lot more functionality," Creager said.

Summing up VSA 9.4

RIS has found much to like in VSA 9.4. "Live Connect gives us the tools that we need to manage our computer systems; items such as registry editing, uploading and downloading of files from and to an end user's computer without having to be in front of it. The asset management and auditing are a plus. Most of our work is completed using Live Connect to log into our end user's computers. Other things that we like are the ability to see when Agent Procedures have run, when they are scheduled to run, and if they have failed to run," Creager concluded.

"It looks like VSA 9.4 is really heading in the right direction. It is impressive. It is very impressive."

Making use of Kaseya VSA 9.4

Creager's group moved to VSA 9.4 and quickly made use of its key new features. The upgrade was just as fast. "It was one of the smoothest updates we've ever gone through with Kaseya VSA. The day we did the upgrade we ran through the checklist. It was straightforward in checking our server for errors, and the upgrade installed quickly," Creager, technical support manager for RIS, explained.

The new user interface (UI) was the first thing Creager noticed. "We like the new UI. We like that it is a more modern design than what it was before. Each time there has been a major upgrade the end-user interface has gotten better. Overall, it's just more vibrant," Creager said.

Creager also likes that the VSA service desk helps analyze IT details more closely. "Within Service Desk you now have a statistic button to gather quick statistics over a time period that you choose," Creager said.