Crystal Ball Gazing for IT Help Desks

A Sliding Mind Whitepaper

Introduction

In the film Minority Report, crimes could be predicted and therefore prevented. The end result? By the year 2054, murder had been eradicated! Wouldn't it be great if one could apply the same approach to supporting users and their applications? Zero downtime, quick issue resolution and every end user would be convinced that their IS department was manned exclusively by super men and wonder women. The reality is sadly somewhat different.

Problems frequently occur as users interact with their applications. The causes are as varied as the problems. Insufficient training, application bugs, operating system problems and system upgrades are among the most common. But whatever the cause, the effects are the same. The end user will turn to their IT help desk, and while actively keen to free themselves of any further involvement, they will inevitably always be involved in explaining their issue in detail.

Since the IT help desk or service desk is not in the habit of gazing into its crystal ball, it could not predict the future and so would not necessarily know that the problem was going to happen. And since it cannot time travel and review the immediate past, the staff manning the help desk will start their familiar barrage of questions aimed at the end user, starting with one question that crosses the ages….

….*"What did you do to cause the problem?"*

Without a meaningful answer the help desk knows that the problem will remain exactly that, and that the problem will remain with them. Without this vital information, the clock continues to run both for the user and the help desk. We know the user wants to be free of this issue so that they can, if possible, work on other things, but until the help desk has the issue reproduction steps, only the end user remains the critical path. The service desk is acutely aware of its service level agreements (SLAs) and until the issue has been reproduced it cannot be resolved or passed to the competent party.

What if we are unable to predict the future and avoid the above issue in the first place? What if time travel was possible and the help desk could easily review the immediate past?

Welcome to the Future

Crystal ball gazing is now possible with TrackPath, a new class of product designed to immediately provide precisely the information that a service desk needs to make progress and to instantly free end users to return to their tasks. By monitoring enterprise applications from the perspective of the desktop, with a low-impact, lightweight desktop agent, the time and cost savings are both immediate and calculable. Sliding Mind provide an ROI calculator which typically shows a 250% return at: http://slidingmind.com/trackpath/roi-calculator/.

Assistance for the Fast Resolution of Issues

TrackPath is an incredibly lightweight, ever-active agent that can be installed on any PC running Microsoft Windows XP, Vista or Windows 7. The information it tracks includes screen prints together with mouse and keyboard inputs grouped by application covering recent activity.

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This information is instantly available to the user and in addition TrackPath proactively tracks the system logs so that it can alert the user and prompt them to create a full error report. Such error reports can then be simply despatched according to the defined corporate policy for reporting errors, whether that be email, via help desk management products or whatever the company chooses.

Secure Error Reports

Security of the information contained in an error report is a particular strength of TrackPath. Now while many ad hoc error reports already have screen prints and reproduction steps which can contain confidential or at least sensitive data, TrackPath takes a proactive approach to this key area. For companies concerned with confidentiality of data handled by particular user groups, such as Payroll teams, TrackPath also has the ability to obscure sensitive data. TrackPath provides the capability to specify how much information is provided to support personnel, and the amount of screen detail can be specified by application.

Nothing leaves the PC without the specific approval of the user and even that approval will be automatically held if the TrackPath policy has been set to prevent the reporting of certain corporate applications.

TrackPath is not spyware and exists solely to improve the reporting of issues. When a user starts to report an issue they are presented with screen prints where the failing application is in sharp clarity while other applications which may contain unwittingly sensitive information are blurred.

The user has the chance to review every screen and input with the option to hide sensitive screen areas or particular mouse movements or keystrokes. They can also annotate areas of the screen to add clarity to their report. Interestingly, TrackPath graphically provides feedback on application usability with the use of the mouse reflected in its paths and dwell points.

Intelligent Feedback to the Help Desk

A historic timeline is easily recognised by the end user and each screen is also annotated with the CPU and memory usage which may give important clues to the cause of the issue that is being reported. Finally the report is augmented with full details of the hardware and operation system configuration of the PC together with full application version information.

Helping Meet Your SLAs

When implemented across a corporation Service Level Agreements (SLAs) can be set and met with more confidence, vendors who specialise in providing external application support can be more aggressive with their rates, defects discovered during user acceptance tests can be reported accurately and quickly, and training materials can be rapidly and professionally created.

So while TrackPath cannot solve the murder rate, it can dramatically reduce the dead time spent in defect reproduction.
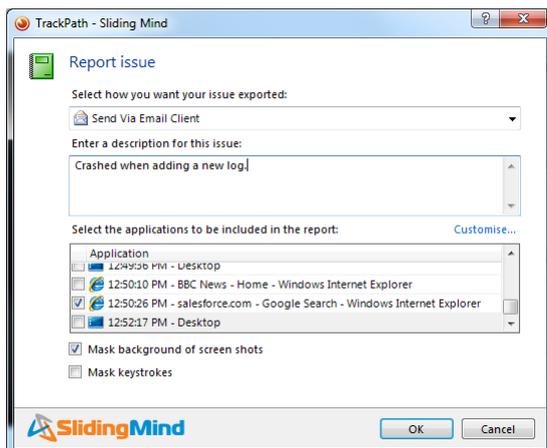
About Sliding Mind Software

Sliding Mind was formed by Original Software in 2010 to develop new products based upon the technology and intellectual property that underpins the Original Software AQM solution suite that comprises Qualify, TestDrive-Assist, TestDrive and TestBench. Identified as a 'visionary' by Gartner, Original Software believes that Sliding Mind can deliver equally innovative solutions to a range of business challenges. The first product, TrackPath, was released in 2011 and is designed to address the key challenges of problem diagnosis and reproduction across help desk and user acceptance test (UAT) operations.

The global financial crisis has brought a welcome sense of financial virtue to businesses and it is now essential that the total cost of an IT investment is known and can be aligned with revenues. All Sliding Mind products are therefore offered on an annual term license that includes the product, help desk and free upgrades during the year.

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