

TOOLS MANAGER

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BigFix | BigFix Enterprise Server v.7.2, Decision Support System Software Asset Management v.1.2

Based in Emeryville, Calif., BigFix (bigfix.com) got its start in patch management before expanding to encompass nearly all of IT configuration management and security automation. From policy compliance to virus protection to asset life-cycle management, the BigFix Enterprise Server stacks more than a dozen point solutions atop one platform, sharing a single agent-based discovery and remediation mechanism, database and user interface. In 2009, the company launched its analytics and software asset management solution, Decision Support System Software Asset Management (DSS SAM) and added numerous enhancements in the last year. In this review we look at the BigFix 7.2 platform, released in October 2009, paying special attention to DSS SAM v.1.2.

Feature and function

BigFix collects software and hardware data using agent and agent-less auto-discovery methods. The agent-less approach gathers software version, platform, Mac address, hardware ID and manufacturer. Managed devices have an installed agent that collects 800-plus properties, including software usage. Looking at executables, add/remove programs, system registries, hardware inputs and usage metering information, it picks up data from Windows, OS X, VMware ESX, Solaris, AIX, HP-UX and Red Hat and SUSE Linux platforms. The agent not only discovers network devices, such as hubs and switches, but can also detect, via Simple Network Management Protocol (SNMP), the presence of unknown machines connecting to them.

When a machine goes offline, the agent is still on, so when the device reconnects it can immediately refresh metering, policy compliance and inventory data. Usage-metering data collected include total duration, average run per day and run-time breakdown by time interval (i.e., per day, per week, per month).

BigFix's policy enforcement capabilities set the company's agent technology apart from the competition. Agents evaluate instruction sets called "Fixlets" for checking client patch levels, anti-virus definitions and other predefined configuration and security parameters. Administrators can then use the data returned to construct automatic enforcements for patch downloads and policy compliance. They can also decide whether to send notification messages to the end-user when deploying a patch or upgrade and can extend options for deferring or cancelling the change. Administrators deploy Fixlets and undertake policy configuration, notification and enforcement tasks via user-friendly options panels, eliminating the need for scripting expertise.

Inventory and usage-metering data feed Web-based reports for manipulating nearly a thousand software and hardware attributes. Users can create custom groups based on these attributes, Active Directory groups and other parameters through an iTunes-like set of drop-down menus. Change history, VMware installation summary and other handy reports are feasible by simply adding asset properties report views.

Managing Editor

Steven Russman

Editor

Carolyn Schwaar

Published by ECP Media LC

400 North First Street
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48103 U.S.A.
ECPmedia.com
Office and fax: 1.734.930.1925

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Built on the BigFix platform, DSS SAM 1.0.1 improved the BigFix user experience and added true inventory management and license reconciliation capabilities. The company released 1.0.1 in November 2008 and sold 1.5 million end-user seats in 2009. The majority of customers are users of the BigFix platform and added DSS as an add-on. The application runs BigFix agent-discovered data through a hierarchical software catalog, licensed from Express Metrix and augmented by BigFix that maps executables to publishers, products and software signatures out-of-box. However, presently, the application catalog only comes with Windows-application data. Administrators can add items and expand the catalog to broaden product and platform support. We'll cover this under enhancements in DSS SAM v.1.2.

Data is presented through an Adobe Flash Web interface. Role-based user profiles govern access to tool features, and reports include software and hardware drill-downs to the seemingly limitless attributes discovered by the BigFix agent. Administrators manually input contract data or import from CSV, and, out of the box, the tool covers cost-per-unit, install count and purchase and expiry date information, associating these to customized groups for granular tracking. Additional fields may be added. Compliance reports match inventory data against license counts for over/under numbers, and the tool can tie license keys to computer IDs—a useful feature for named-user models. Because the BigFix agent meters usage, DSS SAM can monitor for violations on concurrency licenses, though the product does not yet come with overdraft alerts, e-mail notifications or embedded license compliance controls.

Enhancements to DSS SAM v.1.2 include a contract import wizard, an add-to-software-catalog wizard, additional software license models and flexible software usage data and inventory data streams. For license models, the user selects which BigFix properties define a license model (e.g., CPU, processor value units with a custom Fixlet and processor cores, to name a few). The administrator applies the model to a group of computers and compliance is calculated using the reported values. This approach allows administrators to construct models based on any property, a feature unique among license-management tools. For flexible data streams, BigFix added “software ID sources” which allow the administrator to select predefined BigFix properties or define data streams using a combination of properties (i.e., list of programs in a directory, installed UNIX applications or Oracle application usage). The data streams can be used to identify an application and create entries in the software catalog.

Most of BigFix's 800-plus customers subscribe to a few starter solutions, seeking to shore up gaping security or systems management holes. Then, according to the company, many acquire additional modules, attracted by the full interoperability between components. The majority of sales are direct, with some 10 percent coming from outside of North America. Customers transcend sectors and include recognizable names such as Deutsche Bank, NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Nomura International, Novartis, Orange Business Services, Stanford University and SunTrust Banks.

ECP evaluation

The BigFix Unified Management Platform is a good option for companies seeking a multi-function toolset for inventory, software usage, software deployment, plugging security gaps or consolidating multiple security and management functions. The toolset is very broad, and the power of the BigFix agent and the multitude of data it collects, offers numerous possibilities. BigFix is working to expand the catalog, license compliance, contract management and analytics functions, and the enhancements in DSS SAM v.1.2 are a step forward. To broaden its appeal outside of IT security and accelerate development as a SAM tool, the company needs to leverage the foundational auto-discovery capability already in place.

Category	Enterprise
Company Product name	BigFix BigFix Enterprise Server, v. 7.2, Decision Support System Software Asset Management, v.1.2
Business Value Rating	★★★
Life cycle management	▶
Software reconciliation library	▶
Reporting, dashboards and analytics	▶
Procurement and requisition	
Financial management	▼
Contract management	▶(L)
Software license agreements	▶
Vendor management	
License harvesting	▶
License metric tool	▶
Feature/Function Rating	★★★
Data collection	▲
Inventory management	▲
Software catalog	▶
Software usage	▶
User interface	▶
Data fields	
Workflow management	
Software-as-a-Service (SaaS)	
On-premises	Yes
Event notification and interoperability	▶
Security and audit control	▶
Wizards and tools	▶
Virtualization support	▶
IT Service Management Components	
Service level agreement management	
Change management	
Problem management	
Incident management	
ISO/IEC 19770-1 Conformance	
Control environment	Full
Planning and implementation	Partial
Inventory management	Full
Verification and compliance	Partial
Operations management processes and interfaces	Partial
Life-cycle process interfaces for SAM	Partial
Misc.	
Last reviewed	Feb. '09
Target customer	S/M/L
Languages	English, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Spanish



For ECP's *Guide to Selecting, Categorizing and Evaluating Tools*, including an explanation of ratings and definitions of terms, visit IBSMA.com.

Notes:
(L) Indicated limited contract management functionality

Target Customer (no. desktops)
Large: > 5,000
Medium: 1,000 to 5,000
Small: < 1,000

Above expectations: ▲
Meets expectations: ▶
Below expectations: ▼