Rackspace gets 'fanatical' for devops with new service

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Amid growing market demand and general lack of talent for the faster, more-effective application development and deployment practices known as devops, Rackspace is applying what it has learned in its own devops deployment with its new DevOps Automation Service. Given its own operation of nine datacenters worldwide, 200,000 customers and more than 90,000 physical servers, Rackspace's new service is a natural extension of its managed hosting operations combined with newer, faster and more efficient devops processes, all offered as a service. While the company says it did everything manually a few years ago, today's market demands a devops approach with continuous integration, continuous deployment and testing. Touting 2,500 live code updates in production without customer interruption in the last year and the regular running of more than 15,000 automated tests before a customer sees the impact of a single line of code, Rackspace says it can pass on its devops as a service to its primary market of Web hosters and service providers, as well as enterprises.

The 451 Take

Rackspace is right about the dearth of devops expertise and talent in the industry and is wise to pass on its own experience and expertise in its DevOps Automation Service. The company is among others that are beginning to offer devops capabilities and services to a broader audience that includes Rackspace's hosting providers and SMBs, as well as enterprises. It may still be early for many of Rackspace's customers that, unlike users in the enterprise, are not as familiar with the core pieces and practices of devops. However, Rackspace is well positioned to provide such a service and is supporting more than one configuration automation option – both Chef and Ansbile – which could help broaden the offering's appeal.

Products

Rackspace describes its DevOps Automation Service as the next evolution of its branded 'fanatical support.' Also dubbed by Rackspace as a rethink of its support for a new world – that is not traditional IT stacks but the faster, more iterative and responsive technologies and practices of devops – the service started with its own transition in running and supporting infrastructure, the company says. It says it did nearly everything manually three years ago, when devops technologies and practices were just getting their roots with large users that were mostly Web 2.0 and technology companies. Today, as more mainstream enterprises and service providers are adopting devops practices, Rackspace says it can pass along its capabilities in continuous integration, continuous deployment and testing in the cloud to customers through the new service. As an example of its faster, automated devops capability, Rackspace says it has been able to launch 18 new products in the last 18 months.

Rackspace says its DevOps Automation Service provides support for devops tools and practices so customers can automate any infrastructure and thus get software, features and services to market faster. Among the managed services that are part of the offering are: configuration management and automation using Ansible and Chef; application monitoring using NewRelic, StatsD, Graphite and cloud monitoring; workflow automation using Jenkins and RunDeck; and log aggregation using logstash and other tools. Rackspace's DevOps Automation service also supports a variety of languages, frameworks, databases, messaging and other development tools. The service can be used for managing a variety of different infrastructures, including on-premises, off-premises, cloud or dedicated.

'The managed service offering will be available for purchase through a traditional Rackspace Managed Service Level for an additional charge. It is, however, a separate support team within Rackspace, the company says. The devops service has been available to some customers since mid-December 2013, and it will be generally available about the end of Q1 2014.

Customers

Rackspace says the service comes partly from its experience running cloud and traditional infrastructure and the lack of devops talent in the market today. The company says many organizations are finding it frustrating to move from traditional, waterfall application development and release processes to faster, more iterative devops ones. In addition, customers are faced with an overwhelming number and type of choices on the many pieces that go into applications

(languages, databases, UI technologies, etc.) and the variety of infrastructure used to deploy and support them (traditional datacenters, public and private clouds, etc). In addition, most large enterprises and service providers realize the longer it takes to get applications and services to market, the less competitive they will be.

Rackspace contends that while these organizations are embracing newer, continuous technologies and practices, the starting point typically comes back to automating the deployment of infrastructure. Rackspace says this is reflected in strong demand for the automation of deployment processes, staging and test builds. The company says the DevOps Automation Service is an opportunity for customers to offload such tasks to Rackspace. Consistent with what we've seen in devops and open source software for some time, Rackspace reports the service has been built jointly with customers that are adopting devops technology and ideology. The point is that these organizations do not want their developers and divisions focused on configuring and requesting infrastructure; rather, they want developers focused on their core objectives and jobs.

The main target audience of the new service is Web-centric and SaaS companies that are growing quickly and need to deliver new features to their customers more rapidly and more frequently, meaning monthly, weekly, daily or sometimes many times a day. Rackspace says enterprises are also potential customers of the devops service, typically through their Web operations or departmental implementations.

Technology

The cornerstone of Rackspace's DevOps Automation Service is Chef configuration and provisioning automation. The software is a common tool for the configuration and management of infrastructure that can be coded and automated, rather than managed manually through system administrator scripts. The service also supports Ansible, another automation tool that is newer in the market. Rackspace says it will support additional tools, such as Docker containerization, as its customers and the market demand. Rackspace highlights NewRelic and Graphite application monitoring so teams can measure their progress with devops. The new service also relies on workflow engine technology such as Jenkins continuous integration server and RunDeck workflow automation.

Competition

Rackspace isn't the only cloud provider to leverage its devops experience for a service offering. Amazon Web Services, for example, introduced its own service based on Chef recipes and devops practices, Amazon OpsWorks, earlier this year. RightScale is another vendor that supports multiple

clouds and devops implementations. Rackspace's new service will also be competing with other vendors that offer automation, continuous integration and deployment or devops support, including: Automic, BitRock, BMC, CollabNet, Braidware, CA Technologies, CliQr Technologies, Cloudmunch, CloudVelocity, ElasticBox, Electric Cloud, fluid Operations, IBM's Urban Code, OutSystems, Ravello Systems, Skytap, Stackify, UShareSoft, XebiaLabs and ZeroTurnaround. Other configuration automation providers that are not supported by Rackspace, such as Canonical's Juju, CFEngine, Puppet Labs and SaltStack, also represent competition. PaaS offerings, both public and private, offer support for many of the same tools and processes as Rackspace's new service.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths

Rackpace is passing on its own experience and expertise with devops in a new service that also serves to modernize the way the company manages its datacenters and customers.

Weaknesses

The company's core hosting and service provider market is not nearly as mature in terms of devops awareness and adoption as enterprise customers, which is a newer category for Rackspace.

Opportunities

As devops market grows and extends to service providers, the channel and SMBs, Rackspace may be well positioned to capture customers and revenue.

Threats

There are a variety of vendors – from configuration automation players and continuous deployment specialists to PaaS providers – that are also competing in devops.