NetApp Insight 2021 Was (Yawn) Not Very Insightful

By Andrew Glinka | October 2021

NetApp's 2021 Insight event came with a lot of pre-event hype but passed without much substance. NetApp announced no enhancements to address the increasingly interconnected, hyper-demanding workflows emerging in datacenter modernization. The big question to reconcile whether Insight 2021 news was consequential is this: Can ONTAP (even with the latest enhancements) drive the intense levels of functional excellence, coupled with operational simplicity, that the current and future data era demands? Consider this question in the context of exponential data growth, tectonic shifts in how applications use data, and increasing dependency on data analytics.

Insight news in a nutshell

The primary news focused on ONTAP hardware and software and did little to reduce ONTAP complexity or prove NetApp is innovating at a transformative level.

NetApp confirmed our perspective that they struggle to address customers' modern data center problems by pre-announcing ONTAP 9.10.1, a run-of-the-mill storage OS update that brings minor improvements. First, ONTAP 9.10.1 will have built-in ransomware support, which we will dive into in the next section. Second, NetApp reminded us (again) that ONTAP 9.10.1 would include support for TCP/NVMe. Lastly, after a lot of grief from customers on recent "enhancements" to its System Manager UI, NetApp looks to be bringing back some requested functionality.

NetApp also quietly announced the new AFF A900 all-flash array. Playing it safe, the A900 is a "speeds and feeds" update to the existing AFF A700 platform. An unchanged architecture retains the resource silos that create management headaches for busy IT teams and continues NetApp's narrow philosophy of a one-size-fits-all infrastructure. NVMe over TCP keeps the A900 on pace with the industry, but the new array doesn't innovate beyond that. How long can NetApp rely on this empty promise of "ONTAP for everything" to address evolving challenges in modern IT?

In contrast to NetApp's monolithic ONTAP vision, Dell Technologies stands out with a portfolio that keeps you ahead of the curve with purpose-built solutions for any infrastructure requirement.

- Rather than incremental updates, we built an innovative new midrange architecture from scratch to enhance your edge strategy with PowerStore X and AppsON.
- We have the gold standard platform for mission-critical workloads in PowerMax, offering predictable and scalable performance to grow alongside your business.
- To accommodate the fastest-growing and most capacity-intensive unstructured data requirements, PowerScale's scale-out capability enables up to 10x more nodes than NetApp ONTAP clusters[1].

While NetApp soldiers on brute-forcing ONTAP solutions, Dell Technologies gives your business the right tool for any need. How many ONTAP versions will it take NetApp to deliver all of these capabilities?

[1] Based on Dell analysis, Sept. 2021.

Ransomware insights

A key announcement at Insight 2021 was the integration of ransomware capabilities in the new version of ONTAP. At a basic level, these capabilities are based on enhancements to ONTAP file system event log analytics, which was previously positioned for ransomware protection [2]. NetApp appears to be limited around mitigation responses that can prevent an attack, such as file and IP auditing that can be used to disable suspicious user accounts.

NetApp mentioned that its analytics function uses machine learning and focuses on user behavior, but it did not touch on support for more advanced detection vectors such as multi-user behaviors or tripwires, which are offered with Ransomware Defender for Dell EMC PowerScale. Instead, NetApp emphasized that its machine learning function targets the prevention of false-positive alerts, which in our view points to challenges with its fundamental detection mechanisms.

They continued to position snapshot recovery as the primary response to an attack. Without integrated root-cause analytics to pinpoint and recover only infected files—a key feature of PowerScale Ransomware Defender—in a consolidated storage environment, NetApp's snapshot revert mechanism could potentially massively delete valuable data created after the infection occurred.

NetApp did not mention integrated air gap capabilities for a protected, offline vault as a last line of defense. Without an offline data vault, relying solely on snapshots means infections impacting underlying systems and network software can impede recovery. Customers tell us their top priority is resiliency against sophisticated cyber-attacks in case their protection fails. What would happen to your business if a worst-case scenario hampers your ability to recover data from would-be ransom holders?

Dell EMC PowerProtect and PowerScale help give you peace of mind with cyber recovery solutions that go well beyond basic snapshot protection. These include advanced pre-emptive capabilities, sophisticated automated responses, and integrated air gap technology to ensure that immutable copies are isolated from the production environment unable to be opened or controlled.

Storage-as-a-service insights

Announcements around NetApp's Keystone offering were easy to miss, with no fundamental improvements to expedite or streamline technology delivery. Bringing Cloud Volumes and collocated storage into the fold maintains their narrow focus on storage. It doesn't enable you to simplify technology under a single vendor for your entire strategy. How can NetApp deliver IT outcomes without vital components like servers and HCI?

APEX's flexible consumption choices for hybrid and private cloud enable your business to deploy infrastructure using cloud-like on-demand designed for OPEX[3] and resource flexibility to keep your organization agile. Dell Technologies APEX Data Storage Services provides a self-service procurement ordering experience through the APEX console that requires no up-front payment to get started. With a time-to-value in as few as 14 days[4], APEX Data Storage Services gives your business the agility to address

[2] See TR-4572, NetApp Solution for Ransomware

[3] OpEx treatment is subject to customer internal accounting review and policies

[4] Applies in US, UK, France, and Germany. TTV measured between order acceptance and activation. Subject to customer acceptance of APEX terms, credit approval and site qualification, which must be completed before order placement, and customer participation in pre-deployment planning. Product availability, holidays and other factors may impact deployment time.

dynamic growth and change that few vendors can match. APEX gives you complete control over your technology strategy. NetApp does not —and cannot —match the breadth and leadership of technology available with Dell Technologies' APEX, which enables you to achieve the outcomes your business requires across the full spectrum of modern infrastructure. Are NetApp's marginal improvements streamlining and simplifying your consumption experience?

Cloud insights

NetApp also announced two new professional services offerings to help customers adopt a hybrid cloud strategy, relying on specialists to onboard into the data fabric. In addition, NetApp has moved it's AWS Cloud Volumes ONTAP to a managed service offering only. Does the reliance on services to deploy NetApp cloud solutions mean recognize the complex nature of their cloud strategy? Wasn't NetApp HCI intended to simplify this idea?

Abandoning the rapidly expanding HCI market, a common platform for multi-cloud operations proves that a storage-centric portfolio can limit your strategic goals. Beyond services, NetApp enhanced existing offerings such as deeper integrations with NetApp Cloud Insights and ONTAP software to support Kubernetes workloads. Where is the laser focus innovation in cloud capabilities that NetApp bases its cloud reputation on? Do any of these announcements make it easier to fulfill a multi-cloud strategy?

The cloud is not just a destination for your data; it's an operating model for your business. Dell Technologies combines streamlined technology with flexible consumption to deliver cloud operating models that meet your financial and technical goals. APEX Cloud Services with VMware Cloud simplifies multi-cloud needs with a turnkey operating model that provides software-defined compute, storage, and networking with secure and consistent operations across multiple cloud environments—private, public, and edge. Are you shortchanging your organization with a vendor that lacks necessary solutions to support today's massive modern deployments and applications as part of the IT industry's digital and multi-cloud transformation trends?

Final insights

NetApp's conference reaffirms their portfolio gaps will be hard to fill. While Dell Technologies helps propel the industry forward with industry-leading technology across numerous categories, NetApp seems determined to confine its customers in a one-size-fits-all approach to infrastructure. How long are you willing to wait for NetApp to catch up?

Reach out to your local Dell or partner representative to learn how Dell Technologies can address modern IT challenges and accelerate your transformation with a broader and deeper portfolio of solutions - client, infrastructure, consumption, and financial models - that NetApp can't match.