Polk County Schools Protects Data Centers with VMware Carbon Black Cloud Workload

Polk County School District is the seventh largest district in Florida, covering more than 106,000 students and 14,000 employees. For every school and program within the district, the students always come first.

Industry
Education

Strategic priorities
- Gained authoritative context and scaled response in less than two weeks

- Reduced time spent remediating by hours

- Increased visibility across servers

VMware footprint
- VMware Carbon Black Cloud Workload™ Advanced

- VMware vSphere®

With their motto of "Students First," the Polk County School District's (PCSD) mission is to provide a high-quality education for all students. For their IT team, providing that high-quality education means ensuring students' data privacy and protection while avoiding any disruptions to the learning process. Ranking as the seventh largest district in Florida, Polk County covers more than 130 schools with 106,000 students and 14,000 faculty/staff. Acknowledging the continually growing threat landscape, Polk County called on VMware Carbon Black Cloud Workload to secure their data centers and give them the visibility they need to prevent unwanted threats in their environment.

The looming threat of ransomware

At the height of the pandemic in 2020, PCSD was approached by vendors expressing concern over the multitude of school districts being hit with ransomware. When businesses around them started to get hit, Polk County began focusing on what they could do to prevent ransomware. The district had recently upgraded their infrastructure, and there was a strong emphasis on security and how it should be prioritized. The majority of their security existed at the firewall and with traditional measures; they had limited resources in place to protect the workloads in their data centers. Like most school districts, Polk County was in need of a solution that provided industry-standard data center protection and was also easy to implement, maintain and absorbable by existing staff, regardless of size.

Simplified workload protection

Through working with VMware for more than a decade using VMware vSphere, VMware vRealize® Operations™, and VMware vCenter®, Polk County knew their first call would be to VMware. The VMware team has always been very responsive to any issues that arise for Senior Manager of Network Operations Mike Chiavuzzi and his team. Armed with the familiarity of their environment and technology stack, the VMware team presented a demo of how Carbon Black Cloud Workload can easily and quickly isolate a server all from within their current vSphere Client™ console. Chiavuzzi appreciated the simple user interface and capabilities that would help make their jobs easier and more efficient.

Workload security bridges the gap between IT admins and security operations. In the case of Polk County, workload security helps teams that wear various hats manage both responsibilities of IT and security. As a customer of vSphere, Polk County was able to turn on their security with just a click of a button in the same vSphere console they use every day. Tightly integrated with vSphere, Carbon Black Cloud Workload provides a seamless lifecycle management experience that alleviates installation and management overhead. By having osquery and vulnerability assessment within a single console, the team can focus on simplifying their approach to assess their server environment and maintain their overall IT hygiene.

"It's a good value for what you're providing," said Chiavuzzi. "With VMware and Carbon Black married up, it had to be good. It was a pretty easy decision."

After embracing VMware more than 10 years ago, Polk County is now a complete VMware shop for their data center.

A speedy deployment with the help of VMware Professional Services

In assessing their deployment, Polk County took advantage of the Quick Start Deployment services with the VMware Professional Services team.

"I just can't say enough about the ease of getting [Carbon Black Cloud Workload] set up. It's a pretty good turnaround for what you get out of it," says Chiavuzzi.

From onboarding, integration and testing through training Polk County's IT team, the VMware Professional Services team ensured everything stayed on track. Network Administrator Terry Arnold was able to get the product stood up and running within a week and a half on the elected servers. From there, it took two weeks for Carbon Black Cloud Workload to scan all their servers running under a standard policy. By testing a few pilot use cases with Professional Services, Arnold was able to determine the best policies to keep their servers secure. Having that link to Professional Services also meant Arnold had weekly meetings with the VMware team to walk through troubleshooting and drill down into what was really going on in their environment.

> "We know we're catching things, we can see it, and we can monitor [what is happening] so [VMware Carbon Black Cloud Workload] gives us another layer of comfort and security that we never had before."
>
> Mike Chiavuzzi, Senior Manager of Network Operations, Polk County School District

An extra layer of comfort and security

Once the solution was up and running, the team could quickly identify any unsanctioned changes and program modifications on their servers. "9 out of 10 times, that is how ransomware will get through, and I like how [Carbon Black Cloud Workload] will stop it," says Arnold.

Thanks to the new policy the VMware team helped set up, Polk County is now protected from security risks that could arise internally or externally via changes to programs without IT's knowledge.

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With a school district like Polk County, gaining full visibility in a large environment can be challenging, but according to Chiavuzzi, Carbon Black Cloud Workload has been the key to an enhanced security stance not achievable previously. "We know we're catching things, we can see it, and we can monitor [what is happening] so it gives us another layer of comfort and security that we never had before," says Chiavuzzi.

The monitoring and threat protection from Carbon Black Cloud Workload minimizes operational footprint, reducing performance impact on traditional antivirus (AV) scans and giving Polk County the authoritative context to surgically remove vulnerabilities. This allows the team the flexibility to determine the best way to respond to a server. These decisions cannot be made in silos. Carbon Black Cloud Workload gives the PCSD team a single pane of glass to see everything throughout their data centers. If a change or an update breaks something, they would know the root cause for more effective remediation.

Customers like PCSD have greatly reduced the time spent hunting down the root causes of problems with Carbon Black Cloud Workload. "It's fast," says Arnold. "It will take us a couple of hours at the most. Most of the time, it doesn't take that long. If [Carbon Black Cloud Workload] blocked and alerted us to vulnerabilities or threats, then we know where we have to go into."

"What we like the most is it's cloud-based. If [Carbon Black Cloud Workload] discovers something new in ransomware, it's automatically being scanned [in the cloud]," says Arnold. "We don't have to download anything or update all the servers. It's being monitored through your cloud base. That's the part I like."

Looking ahead

Securing the data center is a top priority for the Polk County IT team, and their partnership with VMware has been the catalyst for building out their new security vision. Chiavuzzi acknowledges they have more work to do when it comes to security, but he is eager to explore the possibilities with VMware. Although faced with increasing threats and broadening responsibilities, they believe that the VMware security vision can provide them with the people, processes and technology to get them to where they need to be.

"Everything from support on in has been spot on. No complaints," remarks Chiavuzzi. "I guess that's why we've been a VMware customer for so long."

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