Business challenge
In its role as a data authority, NetApp wanted to derive more value from its own vast repository of system and customer-case data to deliver insight to customers through its digital support channels.

Transformation
NetApp created the Elio With Watson™ virtual assistant, which uses IBM® Watson® Conversation technology on IBM Cloud™ to interact with customers through digital channels in real time. It delivers highly accurate answers four times faster than conventional inquiry methods, helping customers troubleshoot problems on any device, at any time.

Ross Ackerman
Director of Digital Support Strategy
NetApp

Results
4x faster answer provision compared with conventional inquiry methods
Learns with each interaction to continuously improve response accuracy and completeness
Delivers precise answers through any digital channel, on any device, at any time

“Elio helps make what we know more accessible to our customers so that they can stay focused on their own digital transformations.”
— Ross Ackerman, Director of Digital Support Strategy, NetApp

NetApp
Elio With Watson, the virtual support assistant, transforms digital customer service

NetApp provides a full range of hybrid cloud data services that simplify application and data management across cloud and on-premises environments to accelerate digital transformation. With help from NetApp and its partners, global organizations can unleash the full potential of their data to realize their own digital transformations. Headquartered in Sunnyvale, California, and incorporated in 1992, NetApp achieved USD 5.5 billion in revenue in fiscal year 2017. The company has 10,200 employees in three US locations and globally.
Empowering customers with data

NetApp helps its customers become data visionaries. Companies understand that data is the lifeblood of their business, but they can only extract value from that data as quickly as their underlying infrastructure can manage it. That’s why customer adoption of NetApp solutions for enabling a Data Fabric continues to grow at such an enormous rate.

NetApp demonstrates its strong commitment to empowering customers to change the world with data by continuously improving and enhancing both its products and services. The company’s operational support services aim to help customers improve efficiency and quickly resolve issues to keep data flowing through their organizations. NetApp knows that its customers want to spend more time focusing on their own clientele, not on managing their infrastructure.

With the advent of AI for business, NetApp quickly saw the value in using that technology and its own deep knowledge base to create a more data-driven customer experience. NetApp wanted to derive more insight from its own vast repository of customer and system data and deliver its value through digital support channels. Ross Ackerman, Director of Digital Support Strategy at NetApp, explains. “We asked, ‘What if we could quickly access and deliver consistent, accurate answers by analyzing not only the information about an individual customer’s system but also all the questions that other customers have asked about that same system?’”

“Our digital support is a touchpoint with our customers. Sometimes it’s the only time they spend interacting directly with NetApp,” states Ackerman. “We should make those interactions fantastic. That means creating an interactive assistant that helps customers anytime via any channel. It must respond quickly with accurate answers and minimal effort on the customer’s part, whether they are at their desk or on their mobile device in the middle of the night.”

As part of its digital customer support transformation, NetApp decided to create a virtual assistant that could respond to customers 24 hours a day. To generate customer-focused interactions, the company needed an assistant that understood queries submitted in natural language, not just preset search terms. Not just another chatbot, it had to become deeply familiar with the ever-growing body of knowledge about NetApp products and services. Finally, the assistant would need initial training on, and ongoing learning from, the different types of issues and questions customers posed. In short, NetApp sought an AI-driven solution to empower its digital support assistant.

Transforming customer support

Thanks to a rich history of successful partnerships and endeavors—for example, IBM Cloud runs on NetApp hardware—NetApp naturally turned to IBM to help create its AI digital assistant, which it named Elio. IBM Watson technology provides the edge that NetApp needed to set Elio apart from other chatbots and assistants.

“NetApp and IBM believe that AI is essential to helping companies harness data that is distributed, dynamic and diverse,” said Bruce Anderson, Global Managing Director, Electronics Industry at IBM. “Combining Watson capabilities and NetApp’s deep knowledge of data helps companies drive digital transformation with a transformative customer experience.” Elio became an official With Watson Premier App in late 2017.

Elio With Watson uses Watson Conversation application programming interface (API) capabilities to interact with customers directly through multiple digital channels in real time. Customers can engage with Elio on the web, in a mobile app and from selected NetApp products, to get fast, consistent answers to their questions. If Elio cannot solve an issue, it connects the customer directly to the right NetApp technical support engineer—no more waiting for a phone call or navigating complex phone systems.

NetApp tapped its unmatched body of product and customer interaction knowledge as the source of wisdom for its customer experience transformation. “Elio helps bring the benefits of our being data-driven to our customers, making what we know more accessible to them so that they can stay focused on their own digital transformations,” says Ackerman.

Through the Elio app and the natural language processing (NLP) technology behind the Watson Conversation API, NetApp can learn from customer interactions in near real-time. “We know what questions are being asked and what trends are occurring when a new product releases,” says Ackerman. “We can correlate that with the telemetry data from the customer’s NetApp products to gain a more detailed understanding of our customers and their needs.”

To ensure that Elio continually provides the best customer experience, NetApp created a center of excellence (COE) to build and sustain the Elio solution. The company divided the COE into three primary, but somewhat overlapping, roles: explainers, trainers and sustainers.
Explainers help link the Watson technology to NetApp's business strategy. Explainers know and understand NetApp's challenges, goals and targets, and they look for an Watson API capability to help the Elio assistant address them.

Trainers work closely with the IBM Global Business Services® team to build the solution, construct a responsive user interface (UI), and develop an orchestration engine to optimize data flow. Global Business Services consultants also assisted and guided NetApp trainers as they taught the Watson API about NetApp. Trainers ensure that the Watson service understands the company's product information as well as data from and the insights learned about customer interactions.

Sustainers maintain the solution and add to the knowledge base that the Watson API uses to assist customers. As NetApp expands its products and offerings, sustainers help ensure that Elio stays up to speed so that it can continue to provide accurate and fast customer support.

**Delivering AI insight**

Elio has become an integral part of the NetApp digital customer experience strategy. Whether customers need to solve problems or simply want to learn more about their NetApp products and technologies, Elio can help them quickly and accurately find answers and information.

NetApp believes that customer support for a product is as important as the product itself. Elio possesses many qualities of an exemplary customer service representative:

**Elio is fast.** For example, Elio's average time to answer queries is four times faster than conventional inquiry methods.

**Elio is accurate.** Elio taps in to the company's product and customer-case data to deliver consistent, correct answers the first time. NetApp also collects and analyzes data from Elio's customer interactions to further improve responses.

Elio is quick to learn and easy to train. Thanks to the Watson Conversation API's self-learning AI technology, Elio continues to learn and refine its answers with each interaction. The company's COE sustainers will continue to train Elio.

Elio is responsive. If NetApp identifies new inquiry patterns or topics from customer questions, it can create new responses for the virtual assistant. As Ackerman notes: "We can get in front of the customer and guide them quickly. Because we already know the question they're going to ask, we can make sure the answer is already there, effectively solving the problem for the customer."

By combining Watson API capabilities with its own deep data experience, NetApp helps companies drive digital transformation through a personalized customer experience with Elio at its heart.

**Solution components**

- IBM® Cloud™
- IBM Electronics Industry
- IBM Global Business Services®
- IBM Watson® Conversation
- With Watson™

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