

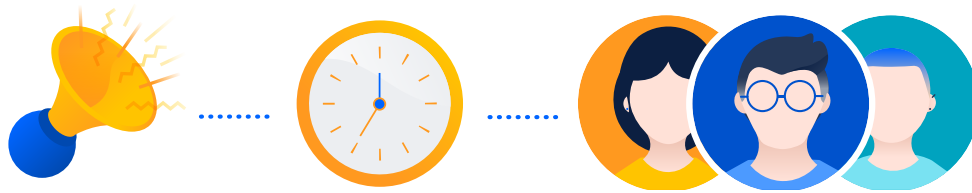
# Buyer's Guide

For choosing the right alerting and incident management solution

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## Choosing the right alerting and incident management solution

Most organizations employ a multitude of IT alerting and incident management tools and applications such as monitoring, ticketing, configuration, change management, etc for IT management teams.

Although each of these tools may be individually capable of sending notifications via email or SMS, it is a burden for administrators to maintain and manage this information. Effective alerting and incident management tools will enable organizations the ability to consolidate these notifications into a single actionable system.

In this buyer's guide, we will explore the questions all IT management should ask themselves when looking for an efficient and collaborative alerting and incident management solution for their dev & ops teams.

To help organize this guide, we broke it out into 7 sections: Alerts, Notifications, Mobile Apps, Integrations, On-Call Schedules and Escalations, and Pricing. Ultimately, this guide will take you through each section and help you decide which solution works best for you, your IT team, and your organization.



# Alerts

Alerts are typically generated by operational management tools. An alert contains all the available information that may be relevant to the recipients of the alert to provide the context.

Feature Set	Questions to Ask
<b>Alert content configuration</b>	<p>Do alerts contain sufficient information, (mandatory, optional, and custom) fields?</p> <p>Is all the alert information available to the alert recipients?</p>
<b>Enrichment</b>	<p>Alert recipients need context to be able to assess problem and make quick efficient decisions:</p> <p>Do the APIs and UI support enrichment of the alerts with relevant information?</p> <p>Is there support for attachments of the relevant files (charts, log files, configuration information, etc.)?</p>
<b>Alert life-cycle actions</b>	<p>Does the alert life-cycle actions support acknowledging, escalating, and closing alerts?</p> <p>Does it support taking ownership of an alert and assigning ownership to another user or organization?</p>
<b>Custom alert actions</b>	<p>Does it support defining custom alert actions for alerts that can be triggered by the users via the UI or mobile apps?</p> <p>Can the service pass all alert actions including custom actions to external systems via callbacks?</p> <p>Does the service support callbacks initiated from customer network instead of requiring opening up access to customer network from outside?</p>



# Alerts (Cont'd)

Feature Set	Questions to Ask
<b>Status of the recipients</b>	<p>Organizations often have multiple people respond to alerts, therefore, it's necessary for users to be able to see who is notified for alerts and whether or not they have received alert notifications, viewed the alert, or taken any action.</p> <p>Can the service track and report the status (notification sent/received, alert viewed, action executed, etc.) for each of the alert recipients?</p>
<b>Activity log</b>	<p>Does it track alert activities (when the alert is created, notifications are sent, to whom, using which method, when the alert is viewed, acknowledged, assigned, closed, etc.) and make it available to users?</p>
<b>Add notes</b>	<p>Users need to be able to add information to alerts to record their actions, assist others, etc.</p> <p>Does the service enable users to add notes to alerts via the web UI, mobile apps, and other integrated tools such as chat systems?</p>
<b>Deduplication</b>	<p>Does the service support grouping alerts to reduce number of alerts using customer specified criteria?</p>
<b>Transient alerts</b>	<p>Does the service provide any capabilities to prevent short term transient alerts from interrupting users needlessly?</p>



# Notifications

A notification is the actual information that is sent to the users' devices. Notifications are typically more concise than alerts, and the notification content varies depending on the notification method (email, SMS, mobile push, phone, etc.).

Feature Set	Questions to Ask
<b>Works globally</b>	Can I send notifications (SMS and phone calls, in addition to email and push notifications) to almost anywhere in the world?
<b>Multiple notification methods</b>	<p>Can I send notifications using multiple notification methods (email, SMS, phone calls, or push notifications), and try them multiple times?</p> <p>Multiple notification methods are notifications configured by the user. It will send notifications until the user "views" the alert and/or continues to send notifications until the user acknowledges the alert explicitly. It is recommended that once the acknowledgement stops escalations, users should not have to acknowledge the alert to stop the notifications.</p>
<b>Multiple emails, phone numbers, devices</b>	Does the service support notifications through apps on multiple devices, multiple phone numbers, and emails?
<b>Custom alert actions</b>	<p>Can the service pass all alert actions including custom actions to external systems via callbacks?</p> <p>Does the service support callbacks initiated from customer network instead of requiring opening up access to customer network from outside?</p>



# Notifications (Cont'd)

Feature Set	Questions to Ask
<b>Different notification methods for different alerts at different times of the day</b>	<p>Alerts have different level of importance and urgency. Users need to be able to differentiate how they will be notified for different alerts, such as email for only non-urgent alerts at night time, etc.</p> <p>Are users able to specify how they would like to get notified?</p> <p>Are users able to define notification rules and specify the notification methods for different alerts at different times of the day?</p>
<b>Notification when an alert is acknowledged and closed</b>	<p>Will it allow users to be notified, not only when an alert is created, but also when it's acknowledged and closed (only if they choose to be notified)?</p> <p>Users should also be able to define rules to receive these notifications using matching criteria for subsets of alerts.</p>
<b>Quiet hours</b>	<p>Will I be allowed to define “quiet hours” and not to receive alerts?</p> <p>Can I bypass “quiet hours” with explicit alert tags?</p>
<b>Muting of notifications</b>	<p>Does the service allow users to pause notifications temporarily when needed?</p>



# Mobile Apps

Mobile apps grant users the ability to receive notifications, access alert information, and manage their preferences from a mobile device.

Feature Set	Questions to Ask
<b>Native apps for iPhone, Android, Blackberry and Windows</b>	Does the vendor offer a mobile application program that has been developed for mobile platforms used by your users?
<b>Mobile web UI (HTML5)</b>	Is the vendor's website responsive so that the user has the ability to manage their account easily using a mobile device?
<b>Simple web UI</b>	Will it support users that do not have a smartphone with modern web browsers?
<b>Access to alert data</b>	Can the users see alerts, as well as alert details for each alert (alert fields, tags, attached files, activity log, status of the recipients, etc.) using mobile apps?
<b>Create schedule exceptions</b>	Can users define ad-hoc changes to on-call schedules directly from mobile apps?
<b>Control notification methods</b>	Can users enable/disable methods anytime directly from mobile apps?
<b>Custom notification sounds</b>	Can users customize the notification sounds in mobile apps?  Can users define different notification sounds for different alerts?





# Integrations

Alerting and incident management solutions often act as the hub for all alert data. Robust, easy to use, bi-directional integration capabilities with monitoring systems, other incident management systems, group communications systems are essential for an effective solution.

Feature Set	Questions to Ask
<b>Web API and SDKs</b>	Does the service provide web APIs and SDKs for integration?
<b>Command line utility</b>	Does the service provide a command line utility for easy integration from shell scripts, etc.?
<b>Email integration</b>	Does the service support creating alerts via email? Also, can it: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Close alerts automatically via email?</li><li>• Maintain the original email, make it available to the users along with the alert with full content (images, layout, etc.)?</li><li>• Parse email content using string processing convenience methods and regular expressions?</li></ul>
<b>Webhooks</b>	Does the service support webhooks as a callback mechanism?  Can the service make a webhook request: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• For alert activity (created, acknowledged, assigned, etc.)?</li><li>• For alert escalations?</li><li>• For user actions?</li></ul>



## Integrations (Cont'd)

Feature Set	Questions to Ask
<b>Bi-directional integration</b>	Will bi-directional integration support callbacks and pass all alert actions (acknowledge, assign, and custom actions) to external systems using webhooks?
<b>Application proxy</b>	Does the service offer a solution for integration if management systems don't have direct access to the web?
<b>ChatOps</b>	<p>Does the service integrate directly with Slack and HipChat and post alert activity as messages?</p> <p>Can users execute commands from Slack/HipChat without requiring an intermediate system to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Acknowledge alerts</li><li>• Take ownership of or assign alerts</li><li>• Create new alerts</li><li>• See who's on-call</li><li>• Escalate alerts to other users and/or teams</li><li>• Enable/disable integrations and policies</li></ul>



# On-Call Schedules, Escalations and Teams

Management of on-call schedules, rotations, and escalations is a core requirement for an alerting and incident management solution.

Feature Set	Questions to Ask
<b>Create schedules</b>	Does the service support creating on-call schedules with daily, weekly, and custom rotations?
<b>Schedule exceptions</b>	Can users create one time exceptions to existing schedules?  Can users or admins define rules for another user to “cover” for them when not available?
<b>On-call notifications</b>	Does the service support notifying users before or when their on-call duty is starting?
<b>On-call flows</b>	Does the service support notifying multiple users concurrently?  Does the service support using different escalation policies based on schedules?  Does the service support limiting rotation times based on time of day and day of week?
<b>Automated escalations</b>	Does the service support escalating to other users or teams automatically: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Until the alert is acknowledged?</li><li>• Until the alert is closed?</li></ul>



# On-Call Schedules, Escalations and Teams (Cont'd)

Feature Set	Questions to Ask
<b>Ad-hoc escalations</b>	<p>Users may need to escalate alerts to the relevant teams/users after assessing the alert.</p> <p>Does the service support interactively escalating the alert to a specific user or team to support scenarios, where the initial responder can escalate the alert to others when/if needed?</p> <p>Does the vendor support notifying additional users without assigning ownership of the alert?</p>
<b>Snooze</b>	<p>Users often want to “snooze” alerts to pause notifications and want the notifications continue at a certain time.</p>
<b>Management of teams</b>	<p>Does the service support managing team membership, on-call schedules and escalations for teams?</p> <p>Can your team administration be delegated?</p>
<b>Alert visibility</b>	<p>Does the service provide any capabilities to manage alert visibility?</p> <p>Can you restrict access to the alerts to specific set of users or members of a team?</p>
<b>Calendar feed</b>	<p>Does the service provide a calendar feed for team and individual schedules, allowing users to import the schedules into calendaring software such as MS Outlook or Google Calendar?</p>

# Pricing

Vendors often provide multiple subscription plans that offers different capabilities. When pricing out a solution it is recommended to look at the capabilities offered by various plans, how they fit with your requirements, pains & issues, and ultimately your budget.

Feature Set	Questions to Ask
Software as a Service	Is the solution available as SaaS? Is it available on-premise?
Subscription plans	Does the vendor provide different subscription plans? What are the differences between different plans?
Cost of notifications	Do the subscription plans include alert notifications via SMS and phone (in addition to, email and push notifications)? If not unlimited, how many notifications are included? If there are additional charges for additional notifications, what are the costs?
Cost of international notifications	Do the subscription plans include alert notifications via SMS and phone internationally? If there are additional charges for additional notifications, what are the costs? Do the costs change for different countries?
Phone, email and chat support	Do the plans include support via email, phone, and chat?

## Pricing (Cont'd)

Feature Set	Questions to Ask
<b>24x7x365 support</b>	Does the vendor offer around the clock support?
<b>Price history</b>	At what rate has the vendor raised their prices on existing customers?
<b>Company age</b>	How long has the vendor been in the industry?
<b>Budget</b>	Does your budget match the number of users you would like to add to effectively run/manage your on-call schedules?

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## Conclusion

When identifying an Alerting and Incident Management (AIM) vendor, we recommend that you look for something that is customizable to your needs, as well as accommodating to your different workflows. It really is dependent on how comfortable you are with the vendor's alerting and notification workflows, mobile applications, integrations, on-call schedules and escalations, pricing, and the additional misc. feature sets. This is why we recommend signing up for a free trial and doing a thorough evaluation. The choice is ultimately yours.



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📧 **Have questions?**

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