Glen Raven embraces automation opportunities with Red Hat

GLEN RAVEN®

Industry

Manufacturing

Headquarters

Burlington, North Carolina, USA

Size

3,000+ employees

"With Red Hat Event-Driven Ansible controlling where, when, and how automation executes, almost anything is possible."

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Zac Durham
Platform Engineering
Director, Glen Raven

Glen Raven's commitment to innovation and continuous improvement has given the business a market-leading position in performance fabrics. IT operations play a key role in this innovation by helping the business run fast and efficiently from order management to manufacturing to logistics. Glen Raven implemented Red Hat Ansible Automation Platform in 2022 to optimize processes that were previously handled manually such as infrastructure management, patching, and certificate automation, to name a few. Glen Raven then extended its deployment to Event-Driven Ansible, part of Ansible Automation Platform, to build secure links between cloud-based service management applications and internal automation controllers. This allowed Glen Raven to react to events from SaaS based applications using established messaging solutions without exposing their automation control plane. The new environment now gives the business a platform on which to base countless use cases while reducing exposure, resource requirements, and business downtime.
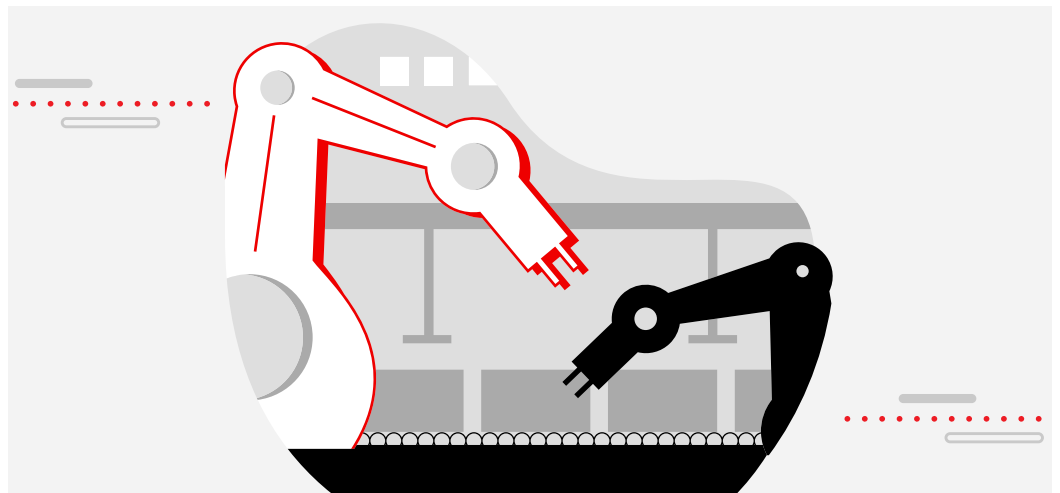
Software and services

Red Hat® Ansible® Automation Platform

Benefits

▸ Completed patching for its Linux environment in around 35 minutes

▸ Enabled valuable interactions with cloud-based service management, observability, and security systems

▸ Simplified model reuse and auditability

Red Hat Innovators in the Open

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Maintaining an environment while minimizing disruption

Launched in 1880 as a cotton mill, Glen Raven's longstanding commitment to innovation and improvement has since led it to become a leader in performance fabrics for the awning, marine, furniture, and protective markets. It now operates 4 main business divisions with locations in 23 countries.

Glen Raven's IT team is responsible for its data centers and virtualization stack, with a particular focus on servicing the business's ERP, technical applications, and database administration teams. Key tasks include infrastructure provisioning and maintenance, patching, storage administration, and support for the middleware and back-end systems that tie Glen Raven's businesses together. "It's a lot of responsibility," said Zac Durham, Platform Engineering Director, Glen Raven. "We're a relatively small team, but we support big things for our company."

When Durham joined Glen Raven in 2013, many of its critical IT processes were carried out manually. Provisioning involved manual configuration based on written documentation, while patching was a time-consuming and laborious process that involved terminal sessions on each virtual machine (VM) that could take admin staff up to 3 hours at a time.

"Our manufacturing operation didn't like to give us many opportunities to patch because it was so disruptive," Durham said. "As a result, we probably only had about 7 intervals throughout the year to carry it out. Given today's cybersecurity landscape where there's such an emphasis on keeping your environment up to date, that's not great."

Transitioning from manual to automated processes

The COVID-19 lockdown gave Glen Raven's IT team a rare window of opportunity. Demand for its products was booming, and the business's resulting focus on manufacturing to meet orders meant project asks of its IT staff were relatively low. "We took that opportunity to make some internal process improvements within IT," said Durham. "One of these was to finally embark on using Ansible Automation Platform."

Glen Raven implemented Red Hat Ansible Automation Platform in early 2022. It is the foundation for building and operating automation services at scale, providing enterprises with a composable, collaborative, and trusted execution environment.

While the IT team had no direct experience with the platform, their scripting and source control management experience did position them to build a robust use case for patching. "We wanted to define the requirements for patching," said Durham. "What were we manually executing and trudging through each time? And how could we leverage Ansible Automation Platform to streamline that and make the outcomes more consistent, to execute the entire thing more efficiently and quickly?"

The implementation's early success then led Durham and his team to broaden the scope of the Ansible Automation Platform deployment. Having moved from an in-house service ticketing system, Glen Raven deployed Atlassian Jira Service Management and looked at using Ansible Automation Platform to fulfill a variety of service requests. However, it needed a way for the cloud-based Jira solutions to work with its internal automation controllers.

"Our automation controllers are critical for us, and we don't want to unnecessarily expose them to networks they really shouldn't be exposed to," said Durham. "We then discovered that Red Hat Event-Driven Ansible was becoming available, so we slammed the brakes on a custom middleware approach we'd been working on to connect these pieces."

Part of the Ansible Automation Platform subscription, Event-Driven Ansible provides the event-handling capability needed to automate time-consuming tasks and respond to changing conditions in any IT domain. For example, internal associates' interactions with Jira deployed in the cloud can be used to influence automated workflows from Ansible Automation Platform on premise by reacting to messages posted to the messaging layer.

"Event-Driven Ansible then became the glue that held everything together," said Durham.

Developing new efficiencies and implementations

Completed patching for its environment in around 35 minutes

Automated processes enabled by Ansible Automation Platform allowed Glen Raven to move from patching 7 times a year to a monthly patching cycle. In doing so, Glen Raven could ensure the security and integrity of its infrastructure with only minimal disruption to critical business operations.

Glen Raven's original target was an hour, but with Ansible Automation Platform, Durham found that his team could complete patching for its entire environment in around 35 minutes. Moving from its legacy approach to the new automated mindset also saved Glen Raven around 120 hours in the first year, allowing administrators to focus on higher-value activities.

"What's really neat is that with Ansible Automation Platform we're no longer executing, we're just validating outcomes," Durham said. "We specified what needed to happen in a playbook, and we know those outcomes will be achieved. We're not in there ourselves trying not to make mistakes."

Enabled valuable interactions with Jira and other cloud solutions

Using the Event-Driven Ansible component of Ansible Automation Platform has enabled Glen Raven to maximize the benefits and efficiencies gained from its Jira platform deployments. Event-Driven Ansible constantly polls event queues to identify new messages, acting as a connector and buffer between cloud-based and internal platforms.

"We now have a strategy for any external system from which we want to drive automation, not just Jira," said Durham. "With Event-Driven Ansible, if we want to initiate automation from an event, we land a message in a queue within a specific service bus instance. That spares us from having to make the very poor decision to expose our automation controller."

Simplified model reuse and auditability

With a new platform that prevents Glen Raven from unnecessarily exposing its automation controller to untrusted networks, Durham and his IT team have a model that is easily reusable for future projects. These include key tasks such as automated identity management, VM creation, or SSL certificate requests.

"It could be a payload from a Jira webhook, or Splunk, or our Endpoint Detection and Response (EDR) platform – any number of things," said Durham. "If we can get structured webhook data out of the system and land it in a service bus, then there are endless possibilities for what we can do with Event-Driven Ansible and the automation controller."

The solution's durability and auditability are also key benefits. "We can audit all parts of that timeline, from event source to it landing at Event-Driven Ansible, and then the execution run within the automation platform," said Durham.

Controlling the where, when, and how of automation

The initial implementations are just the start for Glen Raven, and Durham is in regular contact with Red Hat teams to identify new areas of opportunity. "With Red Hat Event-Driven Ansible controlling where, when, and how automation executes, almost anything is possible," Durham said. "That's not marketing speak; we are fully bought into that idea and there are many other use cases around the corner that we intend to pursue."

Many of these possible use cases center around observability, leveraging Glen Raven's monitoring tools to help take action proactively rather than reactively. "If the observability platform detects resource pressure, for example, we could send a message and have Event-Driven Ansible scale out resources to meet that demand," said Durham.

Another area where Durham sees an opportunity for Event-Driven Ansible is security – to automate the mitigation, neutralization, and even remediation of threats. "Then there are more requests around service management, networks, DNS, load balancer and proxy configurations, even managing Kubernetes clusters in Azure," said Durham. "The possibilities really are endless."

About Glen Raven

Glen Raven was founded in North Carolina as a cotton mill before focusing on clothing manufacturing. It is now a market leader in the performance fabrics sector and has a global presence in 23 countries across 6 continents. Its best-known brand is Sunbrella®, a performance fabric used extensively for indoor and outdoor upholstery, awnings, shade, and marine applications. Sunbrella is a registered trademark of Glen Raven, Inc.

About Red Hat

Red Hat is the world's leading provider of enterprise open source software solutions, using a community-powered approach to deliver reliable and high-performing Linux, hybrid cloud, container, and Kubernetes technologies. Red Hat helps customers develop cloud-native applications, integrate existing and new IT applications, and automate and manage complex environments. A trusted adviser to the Fortune 500, Red Hat provides award-winning support, training, and consulting services that bring the benefits of open innovation to any industry. Red Hat is a connective hub in a global network of enterprises, partners, and communities, helping organizations grow, transform, and prepare for the digital future.

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