

Developments in Presence

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More telephony changes are coming. A few years ago IPT accelerated convergence and introduced a number of new applications capabilities. Now with the emergence of unified communications (UC), peer-to-peer capabilities will likely erode chunks of traditional PBX functionality and usage. Awareness of and the ability to correctly act on presence information will become an increasingly important component. Today's column discusses some recent announcements in this important area. Future columns will track other developments from both leading vendors and startup hopefuls.

As I've discussed before, UC is "communications integrated to optimize business processes" according to UCStrategies.com. Of course, those of us interested in this column understand that contact centers have for years been doing exactly that – embedding communications capabilities directly into business processes. Customers seeking service or placing orders are smoothly guided into the structured environment of a center where a self-service system or a qualified agent can address their needs. Most other business activities don't have nearly the same level of coordination between communications and workflow.

In an inbound contact center, the agent's job is to be available and ready with information needed to field calls – "butts in seats". But where the company's activities require internal communications and interactions to keep work flowing, the individuals needed may not be so easily found. Those butts may be in a conference room meeting, traveling to another location, or engaged in another activity. This is why a critical component of UC is the concept of "presence" – the underlying capability to know who is available through what media and for what purposes.

Contact centers will find presence and UC to be increasingly important. While they traditionally have been focused on external communications with customers, advanced centers will pursue growing opportunities to productively link outsiders directly with available internal resources. More complex interactions and greater potential for first call resolution mean that these new capabilities will be good ROI demonstration opportunities for UC.

In general, presence information will be derived from a combination of sources. A user, George, interacts with a variety of devices (PC, cell and desk phone, PDA, various networks, etc.) which will collect and communicate information to a presence server. George will have a profile in that server specifying rules about whom and how he will communicate with in a variety of situations. When Susan needs to contact George, she can see his availability and decide how best to initiate contact him.

Many vendors' devices will be information sources. Many vendors will try to be the supplier of the presence server. Standards and interconnection capabilities will be crucial, as will corporate

policy decisions about security, privacy, and access control. Let's look at what a few of the leading vendors have announced.

Cisco has been positioning itself at the forefront of UC for over a year. Joe Burton, Cisco's product management lead for UC, describes presence as the "dial tone for rich media" that will allow people to communicate effectively and seamlessly using a variety of devices and channels. The Cisco Unified Presence Server (CUPS) collects, stores, and makes available presence information to a variety of devices and applications. It uses the industry standards body IETF's SIP/SIMPLE protocols to communicate with both Cisco and non-Cisco systems. For example, Microsoft LCS 2005/Office Communicator and IBM Sametime 7.5 can be federated to enable these desktop environments to work with Cisco phones supported on CallManager. Click-to-dial, phone monitoring, and instant messaging functions are supported.

IBM made major announcements at Lotusphere in January that extend Sametime's presence-enabled capabilities. Functionality includes click-to-call from a contact list or document, improved presence features, and links to Microsoft, Macintosh, and Linux. Especially intriguing is the fact that Sametime 7.5 is built on Eclipse, which means that the platform is open to development of plug-ins from IBM or third parties to extend the core functionality. This will likely develop into vertical market applications to tailor presence-enabled applications to a specific business requirement. As an example, imagine displaying a map that shows the location of everyone on a contact list with certain presence characteristics.

Another big announcement at Lotusphere was Lotus Connections, a platform to support business-grade social computing. Social computing harnesses the knowledge of a dispersed community by providing a means to collect, organize, and present information. To date, most examples of social computing are blogs and places like YouTube, Wikipedia, MySpace, eBay, craigslist, etc. Imagine having similar tools oriented to capturing and making available information important to how a company operates or gets things done.

Cisco and IBM are just two examples in a flood of announcements. I'll discuss in future columns the positions of telecom suppliers such as Siemens Openscape, and independent companies like Jabber. These and other announcements are primarily aimed at organizing and streamlining the communications that flows internally in most companies today.

For contact centers, there will be an important opportunity to tap into these emerging networks to better link external customers to internal resources. That linkage has the potential to dramatically reduce the cycle time for getting information needed to meet a caller's needs. Effective transactions, accurate information, delivered rapidly. And presence can help identify the internal specialists best able to help achieve those important business goals.

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