
Market Roundup

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Cisco Unifies IP Communications

By Joyce Tompsett Becknell

This week Cisco launched its new Unified Communications system, a suite of voice, data, and video products and applications. The system is designed to help customers integrate communications with IT infrastructure. The Unified Communications system is based on the Service-Oriented Network Architecture (SONA) that Cisco announced last December. It uses the IT data network as the service delivery platform for communications and Cisco believes it makes it easier for people to find each other more quickly regardless of communications medium or physical location. The solution makes use of new versions of existing products such as CallManager, Unity, MeetingPlace, and IP Contact center as well as new products such as Unified Personal Communicator which uses presence information to help connect people using a GUI that integrates multiple applications, and Unified Presence Server which collects the presence information concerning a user's status and available communications devices and publishes that information to Cisco Personal Communicator as well as to IBM Lotus Sametime and Microsoft Live Communications Server 2005. Customer Interaction Analyzer is another new product which gathers data that gives conversations business context and can help coach and train agents to improve customer communications processes. For mid-market companies Cisco is enhancing several Express versions of its products. Cisco also has a Smart Business Roadmap which should help customers to plan how it will evolve from its current technology to new capabilities in line with their business goals. Also of note, Cisco indicated that it will incorporate session initiation protocol (SIP) natively into its technology, from hard phones to the latest version of CallManager.

Although we've tried to distill the highlights of the launch, the truth is that Cisco has rolled out over forty new products or new versions of products that significantly enhance its IP communications offerings. To fully understand the details will take a while, but the key points are still easy enough to work out. Cisco has adopted the phrase "this changes everything," and believes that this announcement is a real turning point for IP communications. One of the things we've argued is that the world of communications is behind the computing world on several fronts. In particular, the notion of cross-platform integration is something the compute guys have accepted as a goal for a while, and they've made real strides, whereas communications guys have struck us as being convinced that building parallel competing and incompatible networks is a fabulous idea. IP communication capability that more easily helps calls get routed properly, makes traveling decision-makers easier to reach, and takes advantage of customers' variable communications technologies intelligently is a sensible idea and actually stems from the idea that people need to communicate and that the mode they are using at any given moment should not be a gating factor but instead an enhancement or facilitator of the communications process.

Since Cisco is one of the few companies that has a computing heritage on the network side and is also actively participating in the communications revolution, then it would be worrisome if the company didn't understand the need to integrate better than some of its competitors. The solutions that Cisco can achieve with these new products and its decision to make its products play nicely with other vendors' products are a breath of fresh air in this space. We applaud Cisco's recognition that it is playing in a diverse ecosystem and using their powers for good. We hope that Cisco will take a leadership role in helping their partners in the communications space to realize that collaboration, standards, and integration do not in fact stifle competition but instead allow vendors to better focus on where they differentiate and allow everyone to grow from common bases. Additionally customers quite like it. A significant portion of the computing space seems to be accepting this notion at various levels and

the industry is evolving. Once communications vendors embrace this approach then we'll really begin to see convergence and unified communications. What an idea that would be.

New IP Storage from EMC

By *Clay Ryder*

EMC Corporation has announced two new versions of its EMC Celerra platform. The mid-tier EMC Celerra NS350 and EMC Celerra NS704 integrated systems are designed for those who are seeking the storage foundation of an IP-based ILM strategy. The company also announced what it described as the industry's first management solution that brings automated root-cause and impact analysis to NAS. The new EMC Smarts IP Availability Manager for NAS automatically discovers NAS system elements as IP devices, automates real-time root-cause analysis of critical IP network availability problems at all layers, and assesses the potential impact of connectivity failures on related infrastructure. The Celerra NS350 is designed for consolidating applications and servers into a single IP storage system with up to 10 TB of capacity and supports online upgrades from single to dual Data Mover configurations. It offers NAS and iSCSI connectivity, supports both Fibre Channel and ATA drives within a single system, and offers upgrade paths to higher performance and capacity systems. The Celerra NS704 NAS system combines the Celerra NS704 gateway with an EMC CLARiiON CX700 storage array with up to 48 TB of usable capacity and both NAS and iSCSI connectivity. This high-end, integrated NAS platform targets customers that need the ability to consolidate more servers and storage capacity while scaling performance more cost effectively. Both offerings include EMC Celerra's full suite of software and simple Web-based management of configuration, administration, and monitoring. Both also support the feature-rich IP storage capabilities announced by EMC in January, including iSCSI replication and virtual provisioning, as well as EMC Rainfinity Global File Virtualization to migrate and manage files. EMC QuickStart Implementation Services are also available.

These latest offerings are interesting for a few reasons. First, they lend credence to the notion that storage is less about physical attributes than network accessible information. For the entry-level or SMB market segments, this is the IT reality of today. Being competitive in the marketplace requires being competitive with information, not storage, and these Web-based, network-oriented storage solutions are clearly targeting this need. Second, an IT generalist (or even an overworked executive in a startup) should find the familiar Web-based interface and collection of automated functions such as Automated Volume Management and Virtual Provisioning a welcome benefit. Third, the support for NAS and iSCSI, as well as an upgrade path to become a gateway, demonstrates the flexibility of this solution for an organization that may have had modest storage needs but is now looking to future growth. Fourth, the Microsoft Logo Certification for Exchange and SQL Server along with support for Distributed File System and Active Directory integration further ease some of the common issues that smaller organizations face in managing network elements. Being able to manage a Celerra as one would a Windows Server is undoubtedly appealing to those with largely Microsoft-based environments or skill sets. Lastly, the automated root-cause and impact analysis of the NAS is a feature that we believe will appeal to an organization of any size and stripe.

Overall, we are pleased to see a continued focus on the mid sized marketplace by EMC. These offerings are solution-rich, with notable value-add that brings storage solution operations and management in reach of mere IT mortals. The flexibility and Web-based management approach of the latest Celerra we believe is well positioned to meet the needs of the SMB and the more modest marketplace while offering some upgrade paths and investment protection.

SBB Inc. Sets Standardization Goals

By *Susan Dietz*

Dell, Intel, LSI Logic, and EMC, among others, have formed the Storage Bridge Bay Working Group, Inc. with the goal of standardizing storage methods and delivery for SMBs and other groups that need storage solutions rivaling that of enterprises, but don't have the resources to effect that level of seamlessness. Though not affiliated with SNIA, SBB expects to expedite the delivery of emerging storage technologies, such as iSCSI, SAS, archiving, and

virtual tape libraries. Initially, the SBB will focus on developing and distributing specifications for standardizing external disk subsystem technologies. The new alliance will define mechanical and electrical interface requirements between storage arrays and the controller card that gives the array its identity; identities such as JBOD, RAID, iSCSI, Fibre Channel SAN, and NAS. As a result, a storage controller card based on the SBB specification will be able to fit, connect, and electrically operate within a SBB-compliant storage array.

It may not be glamorous, but storage is a very real issue for companies. Universal standards for storage solutions are, we believe, a step in the right direction. A low-cost card that enables the cross-referencing of a storage array seems to be a great idea; interconnecting disparate solutions is probably something that is most likely long overdue. No word yet on the price point for the storage controller card, but it has been touted as “low-cost,” whatever that means. The cost has to be such that the channel can make some margin and that OEMs (like Dell) have incentive to move it along as well.

But let’s not ignore the marketing angle. By forming an alliance, each company is positioning itself to be able to advance its own product solutions within a larger framework. Of course, it’s always been good business sense to sell what a customer base wants, and SMBs have long needed creative, low-user-maintenance, low-cost storage solutions. By providing those solutions, SBB is seeking to fulfill a market need that has previously been overlooked. Storage vendors are part of a dynamic community that understands that getting all of their bits to work together will enable customer solutions without compromising their competitive edge. Let’s hope that their efforts yield even more productive results in the future.