Market Roundup

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Microsoft Reveals Unified Communications Roadmap
Aperi: We're Here and Doing Interesting Stuff
iPod: Not Just for Music Anymore

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Microsoft Reveals Unified Communications Roadmap

By Tony Lock

Microsoft recently announced details of its plans in the area of "unified communications." Unified communications encompasses bringing together the major systems that are routinely used by almost everyone working today including email, instant messaging, and voice communications telephony platforms. The field also seeks to bring in systems that are relatively new or that are just beginning to be deployed in mainstream business such as video conferencing and Web conferencing as well as the more usual audio conferencing. Microsoft's plans include placing unified communications capabilities into its Office System 2007 suite of products. Tools in this wave of releases will include Microsoft Exchange Server 2007, Microsoft Office Live Meeting, and Microsoft Office Speech Server along with Microsoft Office RoundTable. The company's Office Communications Server 2007 and Office Communicator 2007 Client will supply the SIP VoIP telephony, call management, "presence" capabilities, and the VoIP Softphone that will be utilized by users to access the communications systems. The new software platforms are currently scheduled to be released progressively between late 2006 and the second quarter of 2007. Microsoft also announced that it is working with a number of partners, including HP, Motorola, and Siemens to build an ecosystem around its platform.

Unified Communications is an area that has until recently been championed by specialist vendors such as Cisco and Avaya. It is rapidly becoming clear that bringing together a wide range of integrated functionality and business capabilities in the field of communications holds great potential for organizations of all sizes. The current drive is to empower business operations to run more effectively as people have access to key information in an integrated, consistent manner wherever they happen to be located. A feature that has already attracted considerable attention is the feature known as presence, whereby it is possible to see at a glance whether someone is available for contact, i.e., connected to the Internet, and by what means they may be reached (voice, email, IM, etc.). As "softphone" software that provides access to voice and video communications using VoIP systems becomes more widely used, it will become much easier for people to remain in contact without the need to manage a desk phone, mobile phone, and email devices, both static and mobile. Unified communications also holds the potential to integrate business information and applications into the same devices, thus smoothing out access to key business data and enhancing productivity.

The very public entry of Microsoft into an area that has previously been the domain of specialist communications suppliers is certain to raise public awareness of the potential of unified communications. This is especially the case in the small and mid-tier business sectors where traditional communications vendors are beginning to gain visibility. It is also the case that Microsoft is certain to shake things up and may help hasten the marketing plans and hopefully general customer adoption of VoIP systems and unified communications solutions. However, for Microsoft to be as successful in penetrating the space as it could be it will need to ensure that it works with the wider community active in the development of unified communications. This is an area where cooperation among all vendors is essential. Any fragmentation or even perceived lack of maximum interoperability will harm all of the vendors involved. More importantly it will also inhibit adoption of valuable business solutions.

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Aperi: We're Here and Doing Interesting Stuff

By Joyce Tompsett Becknell

This week Aperi, a community of storage vendors dedicated to creating open storage infrastructure software based on industry-standard platforms, announced that it has proposed an open source project to the Eclipse Foundation. Aperi has also announced that Novell is joining the community, bringing the total number of members to ten, including Brocade, Cisco, CA, Emulex, LSI Logic, Fujitsu, IBM, McData, and Network Appliance. Aperi claims to be building and evolving a common, open platform for managing all brands of storage systems which will be available free of charge. The group's members believe that the open source collaboration model is an effective way to bring open standards to systems and has functioned in the areas of datacenter automation and Web services. Finally, Fujitsu, IBM, and McData have also announced that they plan to contribute storage management software code to the Eclipse Aperi project. IBM plans to contribute more than one million lines of code from its TotalStorage Productivity Center software. Aperi plans to work with the Storage Networking Industry Association (SNIA) to drive existing standards and develop new ones while carrying out open source software development under Eclipse. The group has reiterated that the Aperi framework will comply with the Storage Management Initiative Specification (SMI-S) and will be certified at the latest SMI-S levels. In fact, Aperi is positioning itself as the open source implementation of SMI-S. Through the Eclipse project, Aperi says that technology vendors can enable their offerings to the Aperi framework or contribute code to the open source project.

The news about Eclipse should be heartening to those who like Aperi's open source plus open standards approach. Eclipse is an organization that has experience in managing the process of keeping multiple vendors engaged and moving toward their goals. While SNIA and the SMI-S standard have support from a wide range of vendors, they have suffered from process inertia. In essence, it means that Aperi doesn't have to recreate the open source processes necessary to make the vision a reality. In addition to process capabilities, Eclipse also has visibility in the developer, vendor, and user spaces;; credibility with all three groups; extensive experience in bringing projects to fruition; and distribution mechanisms, and has constructed a community that turns to it as a trusted primary source of open source software. Aperi's decision to hitch itself to the Eclipse train bodes well for its ability to move forward.

One cannot help but compare the Aperi group's approach with the recent announcement taken by EMC, HP, HDS, Sun, and Symantec. This group, aka the Fab Five, also wants to see SMI-S continue, but has eschewed the use of open source, preferring to stay with open standards in combination with vendor-specific intellectual property. Putting aside the issue of whether open source is or is not the right approach, the composition of both groups is interesting. All the Fab Five participants are traditional storage and systems companies, albeit with interesting businesses within their portfolios. EMC has Documentum, although that has not played any role thus far, and it also has the potential of Smarts and VMWare in its approach. Symantec has the Veritas capabilities of value-added performance and optimization capabilities, and HP has OpenView. Aperi on the other hand has IBM, NetApp, Emulex and LSI Logic as traditional storage businesses, and IBM has its Tivoli and Director products. But Aperi also has the storage network players: Brocade, Cisco, and McData, and it has CA and Fujitsu, who both have systems management capabilities. The only piece missing is a document or information management provider who might take an interest in this approach. At any rate, Aperi has a wider range of players who focus on different aspects of management which means its approach will go in different directions to those of the Fab Five. Of course we hope this doesn't turn into another battle for standards such as BetaMax versus VHS. In fact it reminds us of the words from the old Melanie song, "I've got a brand new pair of roller skates, you've got a brand new key." We'd like them to get together and try each other out to see if they can create something that can benefit everyone.

iPod: Not Just for Music Anymore

By *Susan Dietz*

Washington D.C. recently enabled Metro riders to download a copy of the revised Fourth of July schedule to their iPods. Called "The Revolutionary Map," it was compatible with any color-screen iPod or Nano that enables viewers to view photos or video. Holiday schedule changes could have been confusing; having The Revolutionary Map would have been a boon to those who are dependent upon the Metro to move around the city.

This is one of the latest attempts to prompt users to combine information access functions into one platform. So far, the market hasn't seemed to wholeheartedly embrace the concept of several functions per device, although sales haven't been completely dead either. This may just be a concept that needs some warming up to in order to see a widespread usage. But despite the lack of market enthusiasm, companies keep trying to reduce all functions—phone, calculator, music player, email service, Internet access, and calendar/organizer—into one form factor. But perhaps content providers are going about this the wrong way by aligning their content for use with only one platform. If the market wants to go with several uses for one device, then perhaps the market will want to choose which device is their primary function, not have companies choose for them. Take, for example, the aforenamed iPods getting maps and transit info downloaded for navigation help. In this case, the user's primary concern is, most likely, the tunes. Getting where they need to go is, if the teens we know are any indication, a secondary consideration. However, eventually getting to where they want to go will become an overriding imperative, especially if it involves food or parental financial supplement. One device for many different functions may be more efficient at times, but not necessarily for all tasks. For example, scheduling an appointment while on the phone almost guarantees that a person has to utilize two separate devices. But having the option of which device by which to consume information is a valuable consideration, one that perhaps eclipses the thought process of many content providers.

And what about data security? Companies that are offering widespread access to their maps and other information must heed security nonetheless. The opening of defenses, even if it's only a crack, often invites hackers to take a stab at infiltration. A one-way download of the subway map to an iPod is quite different from a two way interaction with the accounts payable database through a mobile device; however, all access to information must be guided through a secure, yet flexible mentality. How happy would organizations be with corporate information being held on a non-corporate device, no matter how seemingly innocent that information? Does information downloaded to iPods follow corporate information access rules? Or is that the job of iTunes or other DRM solutions? Transit maps are free and open to the public, but is the combinations for the safe holding the fare machine cash collection keys to have the same free and open access? As with all proprietary information it is doubtful that Human Resources would like to have salary schedules eventually end up floating around on someone's iPod. The scenario may seem far-fetched, but when one considers the numerous and potentially ugly data security breaches that have occurred lately, it is not too much of a stretch of the imagination.

Just because you can doesn't always mean you should. Washington D.C.'s endorsement of the iPod as "the" device to have (was anyone without an iPod aware of Metro schedule changes?) is curiously close to discrimination against of those not in the technological "know" or those who might just think that a mobile phone is a better device for getting transient, location-sensitive information. Afterall, few iPods feature two-way realtime communications, whereas this fits the mold of the mobile phone/browser to the T (sorry, Boston). And what about those who prefer to listen to an MP3? So while we applaud any government agency or NGO that seeks to distribute information in a new way beyond printing more paper, we puzzle about the need to closely align with a single consumption device, especially one that is not commonly associated with two-way realtime communication. Governmental baby steps into the technology arena should be applauded while at the same time closely monitored, just like everything else the government does.