An IP telephony makeover

Cisco was the pioneer and their agenda is data centric. PBX vendors have caught up but they are restrained by the need to protect legacy investments in PBXs and phones. Bob Emmerson takes a look at company that started with a clean sheet of paper.

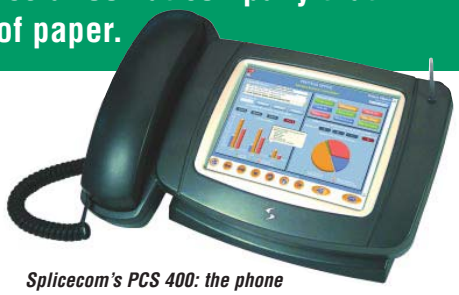
Hot pants and other minimalist outfits were on display at Comms Channel Expo. You noticed? The young ladies were hard to ignore, unlike most of the IP phones on display. These are not 'must have' devices; compared to PDAs and mobile phones they're dull, very dull. One of Mitel's phones has a docking facility for PDAs (see my March 2003 column). It's an interesting, innovative development, but what about regular desktop devices? Surely they should make a visual statement; the amazing functionality of IP apps should be there in the look and feel of the interface. Isn't it time to introduce some real marketing into 21st century communications? To stop talking about the camera and start concentrating on the picture?

It is and a company called Splicecom has come up with the right stuff. The picture in this case is a high-resolution VGA colour screen (640 x 480 pixels). It uses touch screen technology and there's a USB port for a keyboard/mouse. This shows that Splicecom is maximising the potential of IP phones as data devices that live on LANs. There's even a PC Card slot, which allows the phone to be used on wireless LAN.

The software is the same as that of a softphone, so the only difference between a phone and a PC is the size of the screen. And it's interesting to note that HTML is used for the phone's display. Cisco and several other vendors promote XML as the preferred programming language.

CONVERGENCE WITH A DIFFERENCE

Classical convergence has voice and data running over the same set of cables, which means that everybody gets an IP phone, even employees who don't need the new functionality.



Splicecom's PCS 400: the phone that thinks it's a PC. A monochrome model having a lower resolution display is also marketed.

PBX vendors address this migration issue via converged platforms that do both circuit and packet switching (they would, wouldn't they?) Splicecom, however, don't need to protect their legacy systems (there aren't any); nor do they need to drive up IP traffic. This means that they can offer an alternative voice-data configuration.

The hardware sits in a communications centre and different 19" rack modules connect to the regular data and voice cabling. Thus, the two environments are separate, physically, but they are associated logically. Thus, employee 'A' uses a softphone to manage his/her calls but a regular analogue phone is employed to make and receive calls.

LEVERAGING THE WEB

Web pages are created in HTML and they can be pushed to HTML displays: phones as well as PCs in this case. The default page can be defined by IT or telecoms management on a user-by-user basis. This page is displayed when the phone is not being used and in most cases it would be the company's intranet home page. Content can also be pushed on a departmental basis, e.g. sales figures displayed at regular intervals to the sales force.

In addition, the solution can push intranet content based on the identity of incoming or outgoing calls. This would typically be used to link the relevant record in a personal database, the CRM system, or the accounts receivable database.

Specific information can also be displayed using a short-code or speed dial. This might be used to bring up price and delivery information on products that a salesperson handles. As illustrated, the information can be displayed in a separate Window and business graphics can also be employed. This underlines the point made earlier about the phone being used as a feature-rich data device. Richness includes the ability to display Web Cam information, a feature that allows the phone to be used as a security/surveillance device.

THE POWER OF NEW

Technology has given us some great solutions in recent years, but the tasks for which they were originally designed have changed. Incremental improvements can be made, but the 'bolt on' approach can only go so far. Thus, there is a clear need to make a pragmatic makeover of the whole information and communications environment.

IP Communications, video as well as voice, is the key enabler; in fact, it's the only game in town. And when it's employed via a brand-new design rather than an upgrade or a conversion, the power of this amazing technology shines through. In the case of Splicecom it shines in full colour.

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