

New apps lower costs, drive Unified Communications uptake Microsoft predicts 100 million Office customers will 'click to call' within three years.

Within three years, the cost of a typical voice over internet protocol (VoIP) system will be cut in half as the next generation of VoIP systems move from hardware to software, predicts Jeff Raikes, president of Microsoft Corp.'s Business Division. He said by 2009, the technology will rapidly grow to facilitate more than 100 million people making routine phone calls with just a click of their mouse.

"Software is set to transform business phone systems as profoundly as it has transformed virtually every other form of workplace communication," Raikes said. "Over time, the software-based VoIP technology built into Microsoft Office Communications Server and Microsoft Office Communicator will offer so much value and cost savings that it will make the standard telephone look like that old typewriter that's gathering dust in the stockroom."

Outlining Microsoft's progress toward delivering its enterprise voice solutions, Raikes also announced that the software maker started distribution of its public beta-test version of Office Communications Server 2007, Microsoft's VoIP (Voice over IP) and unified communications server and Office Communicator 2007, Microsoft's unified communications client, to millions of testers around the world including the Caribbean, from June.

Raikes reviewed the challenges and costs that IT departments face managing multiple communications systems for telephony and software-based communications. For example, according to a report from Gartner Research, the cost of branded IP handsets, typically accounts for 40 percent to 45 percent of the cost of telephony installation. This is still a main obstacle for companies adopting IP telephony.

He said the listening and call quality offered by a pre-release version of Office Communications Server 2007 was considerably better than that provided by first generation IP phones and Call Manager applications, according to an independent benchmark study conducted by Psytechnics, a firm specializing in voice-quality research.

Raikes described Office Communications Server 2007 and Office Communicator 2007 as the most important new communications technology since Microsoft Outlook 97, an e-mail and personal information manager. He predicted the new products would change the way people contact each other by providing more efficient and effective communications.

Microsoft also announced that for the first time it will be making the interoperability specifications for Office Communications Server 2007 and Office Communicator 2007 available to partners, enabling them to deliver a unified experience with Session Initiation Protocol interoperability between their PBX and Office Communications Server 2007 and Office Communicator 2007.

As a result, customers can avoid the costs of ripping and replacing their existing telephony system. The new unified communications technology will be compatible with their legacy systems. They can also gain productivity benefits through less complexity and better management of their telephony systems.

"We're embarking on a software transformation similar to what we saw from the mainframe to the PC," Raikes said. "With a shift of this magnitude, there will be tremendous opportunities for our industry partners worldwide."

"Office Communications Server 2007 represents a compelling glimpse into the future of collaboration and telephony environments," said David Kam Kin at Infotech Caribbean, a leading regional Microsoft gold certified Partner.

"The new generation of communications tools herald a change in the telephony landscape. Software based systems will not only advance into the territory of hardware based PBX infrastructures, but will also forge new solutions that extend deep into the business productivity applications people use everyday. This augers well for businesses as these solutions offer the potential for economic benefit and represent new possibilities for worker productivity and accessibility."

He said because the traditional communications model contains multiple points of contact, it is very inefficient and often results in reduced productivity and lost opportunities.

"With more streamlined communications featuring tools such as 'click-to-call' it will become easier to contact someone by simply clicking on the person's name within other Microsoft Office applications, such as Microsoft Outlook and Microsoft Office SharePoint® Server.

"Unless someone doesn't want to be contacted, the technology can quickly determine colleagues' availability and the best way to contact them at work or even while they're away or on the road. And, it is versatile enough to bring together people in multiple locations for meetings via the most convenient communications method, whether it's a voice call, audio or video conference, or Web-based document sharing."

"Mobile workers can use their office phone number and other corporate communications tools, including instant messaging and audio or videoconferencing, when working from home or on the road. With lower-cost calling options and simple, secure access without a virtual private network, remote and mobile workers can be more productive with lower communications and support costs."

"For the network administrator, as well as for end users, adopting a unified communications solution will change the whole approach of the information worker," says Phillip Wells Information Systems Manager at St Lucia Distillers Ltd.

"The concept made a lot of sense for our business and with customers and vendors using several different types of technologies to fulfill orders and interact with our delivery, sales and purchasing departments, Our recent Network Infrastructure Upgrade Solution, which involved the implementation of Microsoft SharePoint Portal Server and Windows Mobile Devices for Messaging and Collaboration among other leading Microsoft technology software, has made collaboration easier while driving productivity and lowering the response times of our business units.

Wells, who was appointed to the post a few months ago, said prior to his advocacy of the unified communications solution, the company used several unrelated and unconnected types of technologies to communicate with partners, suppliers and customers.

The email system was hosted off-site and employees did not have access to the internet and their email unless they accessed the company's dial up account.

"There were therefore limitations on how employees accessed corporate email and many used their own Yahoo account just to get the job done. This really was not very professional and it did not portray the image we wanted for our business."

The Unified Communications Solution which was implemented through Microsoft's regional partners, Infotech Caribbean, allowed St Lucia Distillers to exert much more control over employees' access to information, as well as the production process.

"The integrated solution allowed us to set up appointments, use Microsoft SharePoint Portal Services and, even offer web access to people on the road or off the island."

Peter Neptune (2007). Apps, lower costs drive Unified Communications uptake, *The New Executive Times*. October 2007 Vol 5, 42-44

"Since it has a familiar Outlook interface, training requirements are minimal, it's more functional for the end user and productivity is user driven as they can set their own appointments, request read-receipts, make VoIP calls and access many more services without assistance from the network administrator.

"There are far more options available in terms of email box sizes for individuals and departments' mode of communications and for specifying the different levels of access for managers.

"We have more control over the data flowing over the network and we can better manage what comes into and leaves our network environment.

"Prior to this, when employees used their personal email addresses to communicate with customers, we had little control over what types of information they were sending. With all of our official business moving across our own network, we can better manage information and who has access to it.

"After implementation of the new system, the level of usage has increased dramatically, adding to the returns we projected from adopting the system.

"Now, if you have HR issues or are requesting a manager's meeting, we would communicate using the collaboration tools that are integrated into the system. For new job opportunities we now offer the option of sending and receiving applications via email."

"Usage has been up by more than 70 percent within the first three months after the solution was first introduced and it has really added to the productivity of the organisation. Today, more official communications are sent through email rather than through faxing."

He said the product has also lived up to expectations in terms of security and users are only given the level of access that they need to get their job done."

"We operate in a very competitive industry, not just in our home market, but globally as well, and we would not want sensitive and confidential information on sales and margins to be sent on our brands to unauthorised recipients. Only certain users and managers have access to this information. The data is protected by internal enterprise wide security, as well as firewalls and virus scanning software that are standard for all emails and communications flowing from external sources and the internet."

Wells believed that boardrooms across the Caribbean are beginning to throw their support behind IT, because they are seeing the difference it is making to their competitors and there are better IT tools to show the impact these can have on boosting revenues and collaboration, while controlling costs.

"Unified communications is one of those technologies that are outstanding at delivering the kind of return on investment that Caribbean enterprises are looking for.

"We have come a long way and we are getting more support from management. Now the Managing Director has a laptop, he is checking email and is actively using the accounting packages to look at management reports, etc. I feel that once people are sensitised about the value of what they are getting and how they can better use information to improve their business, they will support it," Wells added.

By integrating voice communication and presence information into standard Microsoft tools, it is now much easier for people to leverage the investments that they have made in their technology platform, says Lorcan Camps, President/CEO, Infotech Caribbean.

"For example, how easy is it for you to set up a conference call with more than 3 persons using your PBX? For most people it is either too complicated or simply not possible – and this impacts productivity significantly.

"With this new Microsoft software-based approach, we can now access voicemail from outlook, access outlook from your phone and deal with phone call logs as you would emails. These capabilities, together with the cost savings that are achievable by the use of VOIP will significantly enhance productivity," Camps added.

"Embedded in our technology at Microsoft is the philosophy of People Ready software," says Terrence Philip, Country Manager, Microsoft Trinidad and Tobago, "This simply means that our software is engineered with pervasive capabilities suited to where, when and how people work.

"To achieve this, our solutions are built on an interoperable, integrated Microsoft Office platform that is based on Open Standards. The goal is therefore to provide users with a rich, intuitive and seamless experience, while accessing information from anywhere and on any device.

"This is of particular importance in the Caribbean context where we must continually solve the riddle of geographic constraints, competing in the 'One World of Business', improving the speed and quality of our internal decision making, while reducing operational costs and better leveraging our various technology investments.

"How often have we played phone tag, wondered about un-retrieved important voice messages, complained about email overload, too many devices to use and manage with time running out?

"Microsoft's Unified Communications strategy presents an opportunity for increased productivity and collaboration through communications convergence in a people centric, contextual, standards- based framework that is device and network agnostic, thereby impacting positively on business results.

"Our local office and our Partners have already begun working with organisations throughout the Caribbean region to develop their People Ready Unified Communications Strategy based on the Microsoft Office Platform. The benefit is a high return answer to the riddle that unifies business communication, empowers people, lowers operational cost and simplifies working together."

"By bringing a new approach to traditional telephony, Microsoft asserts that Microsoft Office Communications Server 2007 will deliver better software economics," says Luis Souchet, Information Worker Solutions Specialist at Microsoft West Indies.

"Built on a proven software platform, Microsoft Office Communications Server works with a broad array of devices, phones, applications, services and common management tools, via open, published interfaces and standards - increasing choice and in the long term, helping reduce costs."

Souchet said "Microsoft's partner ecosystem will give customers a choice of phones and devices, dramatically reducing the overall cost of VoIP for businesses."

Companies can also get more value from their existing PBX systems, networks and desk phones by using Office Communications Server to add VoIP and unified communications capabilities without pulling out and replacing existing investments.

This brings all your communications at your desktop into one device, or to the device you are carrying, whenever you are mobile.

"Several customers in the Caribbean are reducing operating expenses by consolidating their communications infrastructure and many more will be banking on Microsoft's new unified communications platform to deliver breakthrough economics in the coming years," Souchet added.