



NEWS

Chambers' Telepresence Vision Sign Of Demand For Collaboration



J. Nicholas Hoover

Senior Editor, InformationWeek Government

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But for all the promise, implementing this next generation of collaboration tools will be enormously difficult. Managing networks for voice and audio is far more complex, since a lost packet can mean jitters, echoes, and dropped words. Offerings like telepresence are still developing, leaving buyers wondering when they'll be mature enough to dive in. And a lot of people still aren't sure they even want all this.

Cultural Change

The University of Nebraska began a pilot of Nortel Networks' Multimedia Communications Server 5100 with unified messaging and multimedia communications late last year for students, professors, and staff at its Lincoln campus. Their communication clients include presence information and a feature that will ring whatever phone a user is carrying, even routing a call to a four-digit on-campus extension to a cell phone.

But old habits are hard to break. The software-based phones sit unused, as people pick up their desk phones rather than click to make a call, and very few use presence management. Says Rich Hauergerud, assis-tant director of telecommunications at the school, "I've had to impart to people that if we're going to launch this to the whole campus, they're going to have to learn to use the presence stuff."

Presence is a perfect example of the challenges of next-generation collaboration. Many people don't want others, especially their bosses, to know where they are. And is it really useful for an exec-utive to broadcast his or her presence information to the whole company? Managing who gets that information can be a challenge. Also, presence must work outside of the company to support many applications, but until VoIP is widely used, there's no guarantee a partner company will be able to plug in. Even then, many IP infrastructure vendors use different flavors of signaling standards that could create incompatibilities.

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Then there's security and compliance. IM worms and viruses are on the rise, so communications must be encrypted and protected. And many companies are legally required to archive E-mail, and even those that aren't risk having to provide E-mail in response to a lawsuit (see story, p. 47). Similar requirements

are likely to be applied to these uni-fied collaborative tools. That means increasing storage capacity to hold video and having a search tool to ferret out relevant video, especially if it's asked for in a subpoena.

Who Wants To Be Seen?

Cisco's Chambers wouldn't reveal details about the telepresence technology he showed President Bush, other than to say the company may have something to market this year. He describes telepresence as the ability to make an IP-based video conversation as rich as face-to-face communication. "It's the first application that I've seen in a long time that isn't just a killer application; it changes business models," he says.

Chambers knows he must address the big problems of videoconferencing. Room videoconferencing systems are generally expensive. Cisco's line will likely include desktop products usable with Webcams. The key there is the quality: Telepresence by definition involves higher-definition video.

When Cisco brings telepresence to market, expect it to announce both room-based and PC products, integrating them into its unified communications offerings. It already sells the IP/VC product line that supports videoconferencing, including a gateway for desktop systems, a video terminal adapter that connects room-based systems to an IP network, and a control unit for linking people from different locations. Its Unified Personal Communicator has videoconferencing capabilities. But these aren't the kind of high-volume, easy-as-E-mail options that Chambers promises to deliver.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

 Nick Hoover is a senior editor for InformationWeek Government, where he covers the federal IT sector. He has written numerous cover stories, features and news stories for the publication and ... [Continued](#)

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