

IP Turf Wars

Are comms managers needed when telephony is a data app? How objective are purchasing decisions now that solutions come from both sides of the equation?

It's logical for communications managers to favour IP telephony solutions that come from incumbent PABX vendors such as Avaya and Siemens. It also makes economic sense since legacy investments in regular phones are partially protected. Not everybody in the average company needs the new functionality, so there's a case to be made for hybrid, circuit- and packet-switched solutions.

It is clear that the validity of that case depends on the functionality of the solution and the ability of the vendor to present an IP Communications roadmap. But if most everything is equal or very similar, then the incumbent is likely to get the nod. This scenario also means that the comms manager is more likely to keep his job.

IT managers might argue that all traffic on the company's LANs and WAN should be administered by a single department. They may also favour their incumbent supplier, i.e. Cisco. This is the company with whom they have an established business relationship and Cisco knows IP inside out. But do they really understand telephony, his comms colleague might retort? Does their solution have all the features of the TDM switch?

The author is painting a somewhat black and white scenario, but there is a very real danger that this type of turf war will result in late implementation of IP Telephony or a purchasing decision being based on the wrong criteria. For example, so-called feature phones are the result of a numbers game. Nobody needs 200 plus telephony features; nobody can remember

the cryptic codes; phones should not come with instructions for use booklets.

But – and it is a very big but – communications managers do include a long list of unnecessary features in their RFPs. This may be deliberate, but let's be generous and say that it's the result of inertia, i.e. that was the required spec for the last PABX so why change it next time around?

This is a card that PABX vendors do play and that is a pity since it disguises the rationale of this development. It made commercial sense when vendors were in catch-up mode, but those days are over. IP Telephony does not represent an extrapolation of the TDM model; it's a disruptive technology that has matured and is enabling a whole raft of communications applications.

Thus, there is no need for turf wars, and with telephony set to become a very important data application there is definitely a place for communications managers. Instead of focussing on hardware and communications protocols, they can and should become involved in the applications that boost productivity and enhance the company's competitive position. Telephony used to be an overhead and ROIs were never done for PABXs, but companies now see communications as "a source of competitive advantage". The quote comes from Forrester Research.

This indicates that a very important job is up for grabs and its importance is set to grow. In the near term IP telephony will enable rather obvious applications such as unified messaging (UM) to deliver their

promise. This one has been held up by the disparate nature of voice mail and e-mail, which meant that phone messages were opaque and had to be listened to sequentially. With UM you see who has left the message, so they can be prioritised and processed in the same way as e-mail.

This may not sound like a particularly big deal, but research by the Radicati Group indicates that UM generates 25 to 40 minutes of additional productivity per day per employee and it can reduce IT support and administrative costs by up to 70%.

Less obvious applications that IP facilitates include the ability to communications-enable mainstream business processes. For example, send out a friendly voice message to delinquent account customers instead of an unfriendly and expensive reminder. Changes to prices and delivery times can also be sent out to the mobile phones of sales forces.

These are not killer apps, but it's early days on the telephony applications front. Vendors offer mainstream applications such as UM, personal assistant and directory services with their solutions, but many more will come from third-party developers. Unlike proprietary TDM switches, IP operates in open environments where vendors publish their APIs and provide software development kits.

Bob Emmerson is a freelance writer who lives in The Netherlands. He can be contacted at b.emmerson@chello.nl.