



LOOKING BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS

The timing of the ITU's mammoth bash is ironic. In 1999 WAP was hot and wireless Internet services were about to explode. This year there is cautious optimism about a recovery. In between the industry almost flushed itself away. Bob Emmerson looks back at the year and makes some cautious predictions.

ITU Telecom World is moribund. Holding this event every four years reflects the glacial speed at which the telecoms industry moves. And it's the computer industry that is driving the communications car, as evidenced by the fact that Mr Chambers and Mr Gates made the keynotes and grabbed the headlines.

Back in 1999 WAP and the wireless Internet got all the attention and Wi-Fi was nowhere. Today one analyst group predicts 35K European hot spots by 2006; another thinks there will be 707 million global users by 2008; not over 700 million, but 707, which implies precision. Nobody can be that precise, but Wi-Fi is an undisputed hit and — surprise, surprise — it means that the wireless Internet has finally arrived. But the market leader is Cisco, not Nokia, who made an early entry into this space. And Wi-Fi not only put the last nail in 3G's coffin, it took the carriers by surprise. The reaction was predictable: first trash it, and then peddle frantically in order to catch up.

IP Telephony

Considering the economic climate and the fact this implementation is disruptive, 2003 was a good year, but not for Cisco. Merrill Lynch replaced Cisco kit with converged platforms from Avaya and rumours circulate about other replacement sites and lost orders. But without Cisco we wouldn't be where we are now. IP Telephony was trashed to the hilt by PBX vendors and now most of them are on board.

It's interesting to note that support for legacy systems as well as PBX protocols has started to appear in Cisco's presentations. And now we have three market leaders: Avaya, Cisco and Siemens. Leadership claims are supported by the

findings of different analyst groups, which really does prove that these outfits are in the guesstimate business.

Mitel is not one of the heavy IP comms hitters, but this company has great technology, so look for some surprisingly big wins towards the end of the year and next quarter. Like Siemens, they are ahead of the pack on the presence/availability front.

The other V in VoIP

It's video. We've been here before, but using video to enhance meetings, including those that take place at the desktop, has entered the convergence picture. Cisco and Microsoft are driving this one forward; the former for conference rooms and the latter for PCs and PDAs.

Cisco likes video because it eats bandwidth and that boosts sales of routers and switches. Microsoft simply wants to continue its dominance of the desktop.

Windows XP is a SIP-based client platform that does IM, voice and video. The server used to be called Greenwich, which indicated that real-time comms were at work, but now it's known somewhat ponderously as Microsoft Office Live Communications Server 2003.

The key back-office players are Radvision and Tandberg. The most impressive service is FastWeb.

Enterprise IM

I cautiously predict that Enterprise IM (EIM) will be really big next year. Popular, downloadable programs such as ICQ and Yahoo are associated with 'chat' and 'buddy lists', but EIM products have additional, innovative functionality that

enables a number of significant business benefits.

The solutions of Bantu and WiredRed Software enable conferences to be established in seconds. The initiator simply clicks on the relevant contact group. Once established, files can be exchanged, thereby turning the conference into a collaboration session.

Alerts are another feature. These will typically be used when important messages have to be delivered to user groups or the entire subscriber base. The message may be an urgent announcement or an indication that an emergency has occurred and that immediate action is required.

If you think IM is insecure and doesn't scale, think again. IM can be employed via the browser. Thus, there is no need to install software on the clients; instead there is a Java applet that loads and unloads when the service is employed. Using browsers also means that solutions can be platform independent, i.e. usage is not limited to Windows PCs. And Bantu's was designed to meet the needs of the US military, which indicates that it can handle hundreds of thousands of simultaneous users.

We're running out of space. Hybrid IP/cellular phones are on Mitel's radar screen. Alcatel's IP PBX upgrade will include cell phone support. Finally, an interesting stat. In the OECD households spend more on communications than alcohol, tobacco and narcotics: about 50% more.

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