



PRESENCE AND MUDDIED WATERS

Presence makes sense. Cultural changes aren't needed because availability is managed.

Your boss can't 'see' what you're doing.

Big Brother is not at work 20 years on.

Bob Emmerson is tired of commentary that confuses the market.

Does Bluetooth compete with Wi-Fi? No, but that one's dead and buried. Does Wi-Fi compete with 3G? 3G hasn't put in an appearance yet but the answer is another No. They're daft questions generated by writers who have to write something every day to fill on-line columns: columns that are a high-tech version of "never mind the quality, feel the width".

But one would expect to find quality commentary in a subscription magazine. And if an analyst writes the article then there shouldn't be an agenda (other than a pitch for research results and vague predictions). There is no need in this case to muddy the water because the writer's company is late to market or has a competing technology.

So, what is one meant to make of comments about other people being able to see exactly what you're doing? This is a palpable nonsense. Presence-aware software displays the status of devices. The only thing that's visible is an icon that indicates if the device is on-line (PC), and whether the person is free to talk or busy (IP phone).

Marginally less daft is the idea that displaying presence will open the floodgates to unwanted phone calls. It's bad enough that mobile phones mean that you can be reached anytime, anywhere: now it gets worse.

It doesn't. It gets very much better because presence-aware software lets users manage their availability via customised communications portals. Functionality includes the ability to determine who can call you, when they can call you, and on what device and medium. If you're in a meeting you might decide to divert all phone calls to voice mail and only accept IM or SMS. You might also accept calls from your boss, partner

and important customers. Users are in control.

There is a potential downside. Software developers might enable availability to be managed in so many refined ways that this key function becomes too confusing.

You need to see presence-aware telephony in action to realise that a velvet revolution is taking place. Everything is enabled via the intuitive browser interface. There's no learning curve, so the benefits are realised immediately. And there's definitely no need to suggest that a culture change is needed.

MORE FIRST-TIME COMMUNICATIONS

Telephone tag: a game we all play. Party A calls Party B and gets voice mail; B calls back and gets A's voice mail. This is something we've come to accept, despite the fact that it wastes time and money; in addition it contributes to stress at the workplace. And failure to communicate adds to another problem: information overload. More messages are left in different media types on different systems and networks.

If you can see the other party's presence you don't call; it's that simple. Think about the time saved and the increase in personal productivity when telephone tag is eliminated. Think about the convenience of 'click to call' communications and the ability to have conference calls on demand. Add the ability to drag and drop documents into a collaboration window. This represents a smarter, better way of working.

NOW IT GETS INTERESTING

Both IM and telephony presence are set to become core components of mainstream applications. When there is a glitch in a workflow

application, for example, the intrinsic stickiness of presence can be used to make intelligent decisions about workflow routing, i.e. information is sent to a list of people who are available and who have the requisite knowledge to handle it.

Now imagine that an important customer has called with a problem involving a set of issues that can only be addressed by a team, e.g. a senior manager, the account manager and high-level techies.

In each case the intrinsic functionality that needs to be in place is the same: (1) find the right people in minutes not hours; (2) supply the relevant information to all parties; (3) put them in contact via a conference call.

This means that a single instance of enterprise-class, presence-aware software can be applied to all mainstream processes: ERP, CRP, SCM, etc. Presence becomes a pervasive parameter that functions at the personal, workgroup and enterprise level, both wireline and wireless. And it gets even better when you bring SIP into the equation.

QUICK CONCLUSION

The business case for presence is more than compelling. There are issues such as standardisation and no doubt more nonsense will be propagated. But this is a development that nobody in ICT can afford to ignore. Let me know what you think.

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