

From one black box

Unified messaging is the wave of the future. **Interviewed by Chelan David**

It's hard to imagine the modern-day office without the technological advancements that have taken place in the past couple of decades. For example, can you picture yourself running to the fax machine or stuffing an envelope every time you need to correspond with the outside world? It's easy to forget that, prior to the advent of e-mail, that's how things worked.

Or can you fathom having to locate a land line to check messages while away from the office? That was the harsh reality before cell phones burst onto the scene.

Of course, the idea of using several different devices to communicate may seem quaint before long. Unified messaging offers the enticing prospect of simplifying communication methods while saving time. Hormazd Dalal, president of Castellan Inc., believes the rise of unified messaging will reshape the way that office communication is handled.

"I think it will be mainstream before the end of the decade," he says.

Smart Business spoke with Dalal about how unified messaging can add to the productivity of employees, the type of software that he expects will take unified messaging mainstream and what advances he envisions in the future.

What is unified messaging?

Unified messaging is the convergence of the different forms of messaging. It brings e-mail, voice mail and faxes into one inbox. Benefits include the ability to have your e-mail read to you from a phone, retrieving your voice mail from your e-mail inbox, or retrieving from a remote device. It unifies the entire process into one mailbox so you can check your e-mail, voice mail or faxes at the same time.

How will unified messaging add to employees' productivity?

Currently, most communication is done by the phone, through voice mail or e-



Hormazd Dalal
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mail. To retrieve these messages, a person must either log onto a computer or dial into the office to retrieve voice mail. This is time consuming. Employees will be far more productive if they can just go to one place and see all communication in one area — be it voice, fax or e-mail.

What software will make unified messaging mainstream?

Today, Microsoft Exchange has the largest market share for messaging servers in the business world. We believe that the next version of Microsoft Exchange combined with Microsoft's commitment to unified messaging will make it mainstream.

Microsoft has also indicated that it will be going into the phone business. It has agreements set up with companies like Samsung and Nortel, so you'll be able to purchase a phone system that will integrate seamlessly with your mailbox and likewise.

When the product that has the largest market share makes unified messaging an added feature, at no additional charge, I think it's safe to say that unified messaging will be compelling enough that no one is going to leave it by the side.

When do you anticipate unified messaging becoming mainstream?

Certainly by the end of the decade. The next version of Exchange that supports unified messaging will be released early next year. Unified messaging will be one of the compelling features that will make people want to upgrade.

As usual, it takes about two years for a new technology to start getting deployed in the marketplace.

What types of questions should a business ask vendors when exploring a unified messaging solution?

You want to know if the vendor has the correct skill set. It's important that he or she has worked with both messaging systems and voice systems. Whether it be a Cisco voice system or any other IP-based phone system, the person must show familiarity with both and understand conceptually how the unified messaging system works. You will want to ask the same types of questions that you would ask of any vendor to test his or her knowledge of the solution you're looking to deploy.

What do you see in the future for unified messaging?

In another five to six years, we'll probably be able to retrieve or communicate with people from practically any device. It could be a device in your pocket that's doubling as a unified messaging client and your cell phone.

As third-generation wireless networks begin to be deployed in the United States as well as across the globe, workers will be able to retrieve unified messages from any device; typically one that is in your pocket or in your car.

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