

Quocirca's Changing Channels – Online conferencing - an opportunity for resellers?

By Bob Tarzey, Service Director, Quocirca Ltd, Jan 26th 2007

One technology fits the software as a service (SaaS) model so neatly that even Microsoft – according to some, the devil incarnate of on-premise software delivery – only provides its product as an on-demand service. That technology is online conferencing.

If you would like to spend less time queuing at airports to board a metal tube crammed with grumpy germ-ridden people and use your time more productively for the pursuit of business and/or personal activities, online conferencing is for you. And, of course, it can boost your environmental credentials to boot.

At a time when data centres are being lambasted for using ever increasing power and generating more and more heat, it is easy to overlook the fact that for some applications this might be better than the alternative. If getting together for a meeting had required just one short car journey, the energy used would be far greater than that generated by the data centre CPU cycles used to power an online meeting.

Of course, online conferencing is not the be all and end all. Sometimes there is no alternative but to look a customer or colleague in the eye (even this can be done with increasingly available video conferencing – but there are psychological reasons why this hasn't taken off as much as some would like). But for many more humdrum meetings, making a special journey is increasingly hard to justify.

It is also true that some will depend on such technologies to enable them to live in remote locations, so that when they do travel for face-to-face meetings the distance covered cancels out all the environmental good using online collaboration has achieved – so let's not kid ourselves: it is sometimes as much about lifestyle as the environment.

So if we are going to save the planet, or just be more relaxed as we watch it heat up – how does it all work in reality, and what opportunity is there for resellers?

There are a number of vendors in the market and they all work in a similar way. The global market leader by a long chalk is WebEx. WebEx has not quite become a verb yet and is looking less likely do so than it did a few years ago. Microsoft with its LiveMeeting product has established a respectable second place, and then there are a host of followers keeping the leaders on their toes with new technology, pricing, and marketing initiatives. This includes Citrix Online, Genesys, and Interwise. IBM is also a player with Sametime, part of its Lotus collaboration suite.

Most vendors provide online conferencing as a purely on-demand service; this is the case for WebEx, Microsoft, Citrix Online, and Genesys. Other vendors like IBM and Interwise offer either an on-demand service or a licensed version of their software to install on-premise catering for those enterprises who like to keep as much as possible inhouse. They can also provide a hybrid model for those who want the best of both worlds.

Either way, once the service is available the subscriber (or licence owner) invites attendees to join a conference. The attendees pay nothing, either joining in using a free agent which they download, or a more rudimentary web interface. The subscribing organisation can pay either for a number of named users, for its own meeting room, or by minutes of conference time used – it varies by vendor.

The vendors have agreed no standards – there is no equivalent of the SIP (session initiation protocol) standard for voice over IP. This means that all attendees have to have a copy of the agent or use the web interface for whatever conferencing service the organiser has subscribed to. This is not a big issue for conferencing within organisations where there can be an agreed single product to use and everyone has the agent on their desktop.

But much online conferencing takes place between companies. This means many will need multiple agents on their desktop, or have to use the more restricted web interface which, for

instance, may not allow application sharing. This can be a problem for those who are not allowed to download applications from the internet and, even if you can, it can take a while to join a conference if you have not downloaded the agent before or if a new version of the agent is available. Some vendors, like Genesys, only provide a web interface.

Most of the vendors will sell via resellers, the exception being Citrix Online which only sells direct. WebEx sells mostly directly, but does have some reseller partners. Microsoft has recently made its LiveMeeting service more

widely available via the channel, where previously it had only worked with a few preferred partners like BT, Intercall, and Verizon. Genesys and IBM will sell via partners and Interwise says it is actively seeking new resellers in Europe.

If you do establish a relationship with one of the vendors and start selling subscriptions to an online conferencing service, you will never have a better excuse for not getting on a plane, or snarled up in a traffic jam – there is no better way to demo the product than sitting back relaxed at your desk.

About Quocirca

Quocirca is one of Europe's leading independent industry analyst firms. One of its biggest assets is the core team of highly experienced analysts drawn from both the corporate and the vendor communities. This team prides itself on maintaining a bigger picture view of what's going on in the IT and communications marketplaces. This allows all of Quocirca's activities to be carried out in the context of the real world and avoids distractions with fads, fashions and the nuts and bolts of specific technologies. Quocirca's focus has always been the point of intersection at which IT meets "the business".

Quocirca Services

The insight and experience that comes from working as an industry analyst as well as a practitioner allows the Quocirca team to contribute significantly to IT Vendors, Service Providers and Corporate clients. To this end, it provides a range of consulting and advisory services. Details of these, along with some of Quocirca's latest analysis, may be obtained by visiting <http://www.quocirca.com>

Quocirca's primary research involves the surveying of many thousands of technical and business end users each quarter, analyzing their perceptions of the possible impact of emerging, evolving and maturing technologies on their businesses.