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IP Telephones Come of Age

January 4, 2006 10:09AM

The ubiquitous desktop phone is now capable of information and productivity services that previously required a PC. Web browser technology is permeating a variety of communications devices, and the desktop IP telephone that physically and logically links to the feature- and function-rich enterprise communications system should most definitely be included in the mix.

➤ With browser-based IP phones, you don't need a desktop PC to do screen pops and other advanced applications. It's been two years since we first discussed in detail the new capabilities and benefits of desktop IP telephones with embedded Web browser functionality.

At the time, very few customers had implemented newly available CTI-like productivity applications via an IP telephone, without an associated PC client. This was primarily because, other than Cisco Systems, the leading IP telephony system suppliers had barely begun to ship the advanced IP telephone models, and most customers were unaware of the potential benefits derived from embedding browser functionality in their desktop telephone.

During the past two years, however, annual shipments of browser-capable IP telephones have increased several-fold (estimated at almost 2 million units this past year in the U.S. alone), and third party application developers such as Net 6 (since acquired by Citrix) and Berbee have been actively promoting the browser option to a growing base of IP-telephony system customers.

IP telephones may outwardly resemble their PCM-based digital predecessors, but there is a significant architectural design difference: a relatively large pixel-based display screen, which may be in color. In contrast to a traditional digital telephone equipped with a one- or two-line display field, many current IP telephone models can display far more information per screen, using a greater variety of visuals: alphanumeric characters, graphics, photographs, even video streams.

By itself, the IP telephone's display is a major advantage, but when this is combined with the embedded processing power to support Web browser access and download of database server information and intelligent interaction with the station user, the result is a major paradigm shift in potential application capabilities. For example, station users can



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input data into a display-based form, Web sites can be downloaded to the screen, or visual information and audible alerts can be pushed to selected desktops.

The upcoming VoiceCon Spring 2006 conference will feature a session in which customers discuss their personal experiences with browser-based desktop IP telephone instruments.

One of Mitel Networks' customers is an exclusive hotel/condominium facility catering to entertainment, sports and business leaders. The enterprise needed to display a member's profile (basic personal data, appointments and messages) whenever a Club Consultant (i.e., a staff employee who handles the phones) received an incoming call from a member. It was important that the Consultant know who the calling member is and all of their profile information immediately. A CTI-based screen pop application is provided when a desktop PC is available, but the same information is also available directly on a Mitel 5240 IP telephone.

The screen pop application runs on a Microsoft platform as a Windows Service and integrates with a third-party vendor, Abacus 21, which hosts the Property Management System that provides the Mitel solution with the member's information (appointments, messages, etc.).

Using MiTAI (Mitel Telephony Applications Interface; a CTI interface), the solution extracts the DID number which represents the membership number and passes it to Abacus 21, which passes back the member's data as an XML string. The solution then parses the XML string and creates Web pages for each member. These Web pages are then pushed to the Mitel phone, where the consultant can navigate between them using command and quick keys on the set. This allows the consultant to quickly view the appointments and messages for the member, without having to look at other devices.

The solution will also push the member's name and membership number to a 5220 IP phone that allows for two lines of display, and will push the member's name to a wireless SpectraLink phone working behind the core system.

Another Mitel customer is a large sports and entertainment facility that deployed a 3300 ICP system for its corporate suites, events lounges and directors offices. The customer needed to improve its hospitality offerings, and needed a customer support service solution that would generate revenue rather than just save money.

Using XML running on the Mitel 5240 IP Phone, the Mitel 3300 Integrated Communications Platform (ICP) and a Windows 2000 Server, the custom development team delivered a solution that allows the sports facility to customize the functionality of the individual 5240 IP Phones and, more importantly, "push" information to the phones.



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Customized advertising, event-related information such as a player's statistics when they score, and catering and ordering information can now be delivered to individual phones by the facility staff that centrally operates and administers the system. The staff now has the ability to easily update and change the information.

The application has transformed the phone into a key customer service tool and revenue-generating vehicle for the facility. Suite owners can now purchase and arrange for customized advertising to be delivered to their customers. The facility is able to use the phone to deliver catering specials, last calls and other service information to the suites as well. And of course, guests can always use the phone to call in an order.

Conclusion

The implementation and utilization of embedded IP telephone application tools signifies the second wave of the IP-telephony evolution, following the installation of IP-based systems as mere replacements for TDM systems, without regard for new features or functions. Now that most customers perceive an IP-telephony system as a mainstream enterprise voice communications solution, they are beginning to understand and leverage differences between it and its predecessor.

The ubiquitous desktop phone is now capable of information and productivity services that previously required a PC. Web browser technology is permeating a variety of communications devices, and the desktop IP telephone that physically and logically links to the feature- and function-rich enterprise communications system should most definitely be included in the mix. It is part of the long term evolutionary design trend that is driving processing power and derived benefits from the back room to the desktop.

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