Networking: The network is 'aware'

May 8 2006

Integrating disparate data and voice networks -- broadband, mobile phone and WiFi -- into one unified network is promising to be a foremost technology trend in the next few years, one that could lead to totally personalized telecom services, experts tell UPI's Networking.

Experts at Gartner Inc., the IT research consultancy, indicate that by 2010 at least 40 percent of U.S. companies will have completely integrated their entire voice and data networks into a single network, and 95 percent of all large and mid-size firms will have at least started the process to do so.

"Some critical, value-added applications that are deployed, or will be deployed, include unified messaging, multimedia collaboration and video communication," a spokesman for Siemens AG., the multinational, Germany-based telecom equipment maker, told Networking.

The company is working with Time-Warner Cable to test this technology -- integrating broadband, WiFi and mobile apps -- by using a new standard, called the Internet Protocol Multimedia Subsystem (IMS), demonstrating that the vision can be made tangible.

Using Siemens technology, Time-Warner is using the technology to support a range of IP-based services, like IP gaming, and packet-and-circuit-switched applications for wireless and fixed-line telephones. "Rather than being limited in capabilities due to silos of network architectures, IMS promises a new world of seamless provisioning opportunities for broadband operators," said Mike LaJoie, chief

technology officer at Time-Warner Cable. "This will include the ability of operators to rapidly and cost-effectively deploy highly personalized entertainment services."

Right now, though decades into the Information Age, networks remain fragmented because there are so many technology platforms used by cable companies, corporations, government agencies and consumers. Once integrated -- according to the current vision -- the networks will be "aware" and will be able to direct calls, video and messages to any device, said LaJoie.

A hint of this kind of integration -- in a successful commercial deployment -- is seen in the integration of instant messaging and e-mail and the mobile phone. "Through cell phone-based instant messaging and e-mail over 700 million people are easily connected for both work and personal online communications," a spokesman for OZ Communications, an e-mail software developer, told Networking. "The mobile e-mail experience mirrors the familiar look and feel of the PC, generating instant consumer adoption and virtually eliminating the learning curve."

That's becoming even truer each day, as developers like OZ are working with organizations like America Online, Boost Mobile, Microsoft, Motorola and T-Mobile USA and Virgin Mobile USA to further integrate the PC and the mobile phone. Software has been developed that enables subscribers to utilize their existing usernames and passwords to access PC and Internet-based IM and e-mail accounts on their mobile devices.

According to Portio Research, the IT consultancy, messaging on mobile phones only began in the second half of the 1990s. In the space of just a few years, mobile messaging has become an immense global industry generating more than $55 billion in 2005. The largest portion of this

revenue comes from simple messaging, worth an estimated $35 billion last year. This is going to continue to soar, experts said.

On an ad hoc basis, other networking applications are slowly being integrated into the wireless world -- like printing. Last month Zebra Technologies, based in suburban Chicago, released a wireless mobile printer for receipt printing and payment processing applications. Like the weatherproofed and "hardened" technologies used in the military, the wireless printer is said to be able to resist extreme temperatures, rain and snow, and even repeated "six foot drops to concrete," the company said.

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Citation: Networking: The network is 'aware' (2006, May 8) retrieved 9 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2006-05-networking-network-aware.html