Microsoft's Office 2007 vision

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Microsoft Office applications are getting a multimedia tech facelift, which will incorporate voice, instant messaging and multi-faceted conferencing in its new 2007 Office system products.

The move by Microsoft unveiled Sunday signifies a big effort by the company to regain its lead in some arenas among competitors Apple and Google to name two, by investing in a unified communications package for Microsoft Office applications.

Given Microsoft's track record, however, questions loom over the security troubles that lie ahead of Microsoft in making a large scope of software features impenetrable to hackers as well as how future Microsoft patches and critical flaw updates will affect the software, and how it will affect Windows Vista.

"Unified communications will drive the next major advancement in individual, team and organizational productivity in today's 24x7, always-connected and increasingly mobile work environment," said Microsoft business division's president Jeff Raikes in San Francisco at a strategy event to announce the latest development. "We believe that through software, we can transform business communications (bringing down both its cost and complexity) by now integrating voice communications with the familiar and powerful communications and collaboration experiences provided by Microsoft."

The software behemoth plans to "bring together" the e-mail offerings of Microsoft Exchange Server -- which will include the new unified messaging capabilities -- as well as Microsoft Office Outlook and Microsoft Speech Server. It also said it would update its real-time collaboration technologies while adding new communications devices.

In a further interview with Raikes on Microsoft's corporate Web site, he said their new products would address the mass-communications struggles in the business world and that the emerging market for unified communications could be upwards of $40 billion.

Additionally, Anoop Gupta, corporate vice president of the Microsoft Unified Communications Group, noted software would be the key to its updated product line.

"To achieve the productivity revolution we believe is possible with unified communications, we need to provide deeper integration of communications modes within the processes we use every day," Gupta said. "Ensuring all modes of communications are people-centric and presence-based will help people find and connect to the right person the first time using the most effective communication modes. Software will be the key to delivering on this promise, resulting in a more powerful end-user experience, real productivity enhancements, and compelling

business value for our customers and partners."

The unified communications announcement also signals strategic alliances with companies including Hewlett-Packard, Motorola and Siemens, as well as telecom equipment manufacturers Polycom, LG-Nortel and Thomson Telecom.

HP will provide hardware devices and systems integrations served for new and enhanced products supporting new elements of the Office applications, while Motorola entered into a multiyear joint market and development deal with Microsoft to provide mobile devices and network hardware based on Office Communications Server 2007 and Office Communicator Mobile, beginning with the Motorola HC700 series rugged mobile computing devices and the Motorola Q smart phone. And Siemens will provide a single unified communications platform for telephony, audio-, video- and Web conferencing and e-mail by integrating its HiPath 8000 softswitch real-time telephony with Microsoft Exchange Server and Microsoft Office Live Communications Server.

According to Microsoft, the new vision of Microsoft 2007 Office applications will include:

-- Microsoft Office Communications Server 2007 will incorporate Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) standards-based real-time communication platform for presence-based VoIP call management, audio- video- and web conferencing, and IM communication within its exiting software applications, services and devices.

-- Microsoft Exchange Server 2007 unified messaging will bring a unified inbox of e-mail, voice mail, and faxing functionality as well as speech-based auto attendant allowing users to access their communications from any phone.

-- Microsoft Office Communicator 2007, which works with the Office Communications Server 2007, will deliver VoIP "softphone," IM for intercompany federation and connectivity to public instant messaging networking such as MSN, AOL and Yahoo!, one-to-one and multiparty audio- video- and web conferencing, and will be available in desktop, browser-based and Windows Mobile-based versions.

-- Microsoft Office Live Meeting is a conferencing service, Microsoft says will help users collaborate, train, and deliver presentations using a PC and Internet connection and will support e-learning, enhanced audio and video capabilities including VoIP, a streamlined user interface, seamless integration with the Microsoft Office system and simpler deployment.

-- Microsoft Office RoundTable, an audio-video collaboration device with a unique 360-degree camera that combines with Office Communications Server 2007, to enhance conferencing and includes a panoramic view of users in the conference room as well as close-up views.

-- Microsoft Office Communicator phone experience will be based on communicator-based software designed to run on an innovative set of new voice and video devices including business-enabled IP desktop phones from Polycom Inc., LG-Nortel Co. Ltd. and Thomson Telecom.

-- PC peripheral devices including USB handsets, wireless USB headsets, USB webcams and PC monitors with built-in audio and video components, Microsoft plans to have work with Microsoft Office Communicator 2007. Devices from industry partners Microsoft is working with include GN Netcom Inc., Logitech, Motorola, Plantronics Inc., Samsung and Tatung Co.

Microsoft plans to release Microsoft Exchange Server 2007 in late 2007

or early 2006, while Microsoft Speech Sever 2007 later this year, while all other new applications are set to release in the second quarter of 2007.

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