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Making your Presence felt
The business case for Instant Messaging

I suspect most people by now will have discovered the joys of Instant Messaging (IM), be it MSN, AOL or Yahoo's flavours. As a user, Instant Messaging is great. It allows you to see when your friends around the world log on to the Internet, and allows you to chat to them, in real time, without waiting for emails to be delivered.

As a business though, IM can be a nightmare. It allows users to waste huge amounts of time, chatting surreptitiously to their friends or colleagues, while giving the appearance of working hard. It also allows information to leave the organisation, bypassing any auditing or legal disclaimers that the email system might apply.

Yet the technology behind IM could well form the basis of the next quantum leap forward in productivity and communication. Presence based systems are the future, and their time is now.

Watch the little IM icon in your system tray (next to the clock), and you will notice that if you sit and idly stare at it for a few minutes, it will change to an hourglass. Glance down your list of "Buddies" in any IM client, and you will see that some are online, some may be "busy", "away", "On the Phone", "Out to Lunch" or "Not Logged On". You know at a glance whether to expect them to react to your message. Now imagine making that information available to the rest of your systems?

The computer knows that you are away from your desk, because nothing has happened for 5 minutes or so. You haven't moved your mouse, or touched the keyboard, so given there isn't a category for "lazy", it is a fair assumption you have nipped off somewhere. If you are running a full screen application (such as a powerpoint presentation), which would prevent you from seeing your messages, it is a fair bet that you are busy. Hopefully, "Not Logged On" should be pretty obvious!

Currently, the other settings have to be set manually. You need to tell it you are Out to Lunch, or on the phone. But imagine if the phone system talked to the IM server? The phone system knows you are on the phone, and could signal that to the IM server and update your status. Likewise, if you keep your calendar in Outlook, your email server knows if you are in a meeting and when you should be free again, and could make that information available to the IM users.

Outlook has actually had this functionality for a while. Open an email you sent to a colleague, and you may notice a little "Pawn" icon indicating that the user is online. Most likely, you will see that it is greyed out and says they are not an online user. This is because to get this functionality, you need a supported IM server running in your

organisation. For users of Microsoft Outlook and Exchange Server, this means Microsoft Live Communication Server 2005.

Live Communication Server (LCS) is like having your own internal IM server. This solves the other main problem of IM, because it can be made to log every conversation, allowing it to be policed for abuse. Very useful when someone complains of being harassed by obscene IM.

LCS can be “Syndicated” to customers, suppliers or to public IM servers. The grand scheme here is that you can share your presence information available beyond the boundaries of your organisation, while retaining control over who can see what.

Now, a whole raft of IM aware systems are becoming available, extending the usefulness of this presence information.

Microsoft Communicator, a new member of the Office family, is a premium IM client. As well as presenting users with presence information about their colleagues, it allows users to see at a glance the near-future availability of colleagues. It will talk to IM aware phone systems, to give the user control over forwarding their calls.

Imagine if the phone system knows you are away from your desk, and could automatically redirect your calls to a mobile or home phone? Then automatically stop the redirect when you return to your desk? This functionality is available now.

Taking it a step further, presence information allows us to build smart applications. Imagine a workflow system that automatically sent the forms to whichever suitable team member was available? Better still, what if the phone system could direct inbound sales calls only to people who were in? The possibilities are endless.

Whatever you think of IM, presence based systems present a great opportunity to streamline the way we do things, and improve customer service. The technology isn't rocket science, and Microsoft has been quietly building it into everything for a while now, and seems to have convinced other software vendors to follow suit. This Technology will soon be making it presence felt.

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