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New Ways to Communicate

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By Michael J. Miller

The industry conferences I attend have always attracted early technology adopters laden with PDAs, cell phones, notebooks, and e-mail gadgets way before they became mainstream. The recent Supernova 2003 conference in Washington, D.C., was no exception. I found myself interested not only in the content of the conference but also in the technology that the attendees were using.

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"Windows was far more cost-effective than Red Hat Linux."

—J.E. Henry
CIO, Regal Entertainment Group

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At the conference, former FCC chairman Reed Hundt argued that the current policy of requiring the existing phone and cable companies to install high-speed connections is not sufficient to deliver high-speed lines (10 Mbps or faster) everywhere. He argued that the government should subsidize universal high-speed connections to every home in the U.S., serviced by multiple ISPs. This, he said, would be a better investment for the economy than the current requirement that all TV sets accept broadcast HDTV signals.

I have serious doubts that Hundt's idea will come to fruition, given the current economic and political situations. But the idea is certainly interesting.

Other speakers discussed the difficulties in replacing the analog twisted-pair connections

that run from the street into our homes, the "stupid" network (in which the intelligence is in the devices at the network's core and edge), and the role of the FCC in setting telecommunications policy. All these issues sparked thoughtful debates on the future shape of the Internet and on the impact of government regulations.

I was equally intrigued by how the conference was run. Although it took place in the basement of a hotel where cell phone signals couldn't reach, all the participants were connected using their laptops and a Wi-Fi access point. The conference had not only an official Web site but also an official wiki—a shared online space where attendees could post comments. At least half a dozen people were commenting on the proceedings on their blogs, or Web logs. Attendees were discussing the conference over Internet Relay Chat (IRC). And needless to say, almost everyone was communicating via instant messaging.

The software people were using was not the stuff of corporate networks. Most of it came from small companies or individuals operating on the fringe of the computer industry. The wiki was created using software from Socialtext. Some of the blogs were built with Blogger, and some people were using Six Apart's Moveable Type. Jabber was the instant-messaging client of choice, and the debates about RSS and Echo as methods of sharing thoughts and headlines were heated. These tools still have some rough edges, but they are changing the way we work.

Blogs for Everyone

People have been blogging for some time, but now it's going mainstream. What started out as a bunch of high-tech geeks, and later political pundits, has now reached critical mass. One acquaintance of mine keeps a blog of life in the town where we live. This is particularly useful since he can update it more frequently than the local newspaper is delivered or the paper's Web site is updated.

Google's recent purchase of Pyra Labs, maker of the popular Blogger software, has helped introduce more people to blogging. Suddenly, easy blogging tools are everywhere. In our After Hours section this issue, we evaluate several online tools that can help you get started.

Blogging will become even more popular now that America Online has announced that AOL 9.0 will include AOL Journals. Blogging is a fascinating trend that will only get bigger over the next few years.

Web Services Build Momentum

The next big wave of IT investment will go toward integrating new and existing applications using Web services protocols. Software companies have been promoting this idea for a while, but I'm just now beginning to see a lot more progress.

Every business I talk to runs old applications, wants new applications, and has an ever-tighter budget. Most though not all of the legacy application developers are creating tools to expose data via XML-based Web services. Even popular sites such as Amazon, eBay, and Google are now exposing their information via Web services.

Getting applications to work together is more than just supporting XML (eXtensible Markup Language). Other standards are involved in basic Web services, including SOAP (Simple Object Access Protocol), WSDL (Web Services Description Language), and UDDI (Universal Description, Discovery, and Integration). But even those aren't enough. What really matters is the degree to which application functions can be exposed in a standards-compliant way. So different industries are now creating different flavors of XML to improve the quality of data links. They're in the process of deciding industry-specific data exchange formats—a vital link for expanding Web services to external partners.

Over the next few years, companies will experiment with Web services to tie together their applications. I expect to see some tension between the individuals and small companies that have done some of the original work on the Web and the big organizations like IBM, Microsoft, and Sun Microsystems that envision a more structured, potentially proprietary approach to Web services.

Several recent developments are helping to move integration along. SalesForce.com recently launched force, an online application builder designed to let developers pull together new applications built on existing ones. And I've seen some neat ways of combining Web components, such as Above All Software's AppBrowser.

But to move Web services forward, lots of work is needed on standards, industry-specific data structures, pilot programs, and new tools. Like every other integration method hyped over the past two decades, Web services isn't a panacea. But it could make creating, managing, and maintaining applications much easier. And that would be a big win for everyone.

In the second of our three-part series on Web services, we evaluate the application servers that are the core of the new platforms from all of the big IT development companies. Next month, we'll look at the different methods for integrating applications.

The Latest in Digital Photography

One of my favorite things to do in the summer is to visit outdoor art shows. One trend I've noticed in recent years is the effect of digital photography on art. My favorite photographs are taken with large-format film cameras. But more and more, I'm seeing quite interesting work photographers are doing with digital cameras.

At a recent show, I saw great photos taken with top-of-the-line digital SLRs and conventional digital cameras. Some of them were shot with film cameras but made excellent use of digital editing tools for extreme close-ups and color work. The photo-editing tools available today are nothing short of amazing.

To help you select the right camera and the best software package to make your photos look better than ever, check out our roundups of digital cameras and photo-editing software. You'll be surprised at the quality that the latest compact digital cameras deliver today. And don't miss the results of our reader satisfaction survey on digital cameras to find out which manufacturers make the grade.

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