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PAGE
29



SIP's potential
in the contact center
comes with both
benefits and caveats

AntiSIPation

Organizations still struggling to quickly connect customers with the most appropriate company representative shouldn't fret: The SIP train is coming. As more companies migrate from a CTI to an IP infrastructure—combining voice and data into one network—new business process capabilities await them, thanks largely to emerging Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) technology.

SIP is a flexible signaling protocol used for establishing sessions between two or more communication channels such as multimedia conferencing apps, IP phones, or instant messaging clients in an IP network. Early adopters are noticing benefits such as shorter technology integration time and lower implementation costs compared to traditional CTI-based deployments. Plus, they are benefiting from emerging presence awareness capabilities, which determine if someone is available to receive a phone call or respond to a Web chat or email.

"The protocol was originally [designed] by the IETF [Internet Engineering Task Force] to create a conferencing protocol for IETF meetings," says Jay Batson, chairman and managing director of the SIP Forum. "But there was clearly a need to generalize how to do multimedia communications over the Internet. The first real draft of SIP appeared in 1997, and it's been going ever since." Now, a slew of well-known vendors are

by Coreen Bailor

working with SIP, including Avaya, Cisco Systems, Genesys Telecommunications Laboratories (Genesys), Microsoft, and Nortel Networks.

SIMPLY SIP

SIP cuts down on integration time and costs, enabling companies to integrate communication channels from disparate vendors—essential for the technology's staying power. Cullen Jennings, distinguished engineer in the Voice Technology Group at Cisco Systems, says SIP "solves the limitations of existing protocols by standardizing the development of applications so new features can be built and deployed throughout an organization without changing or replacing existing equipment." Daniel Hong, senior technology analyst at Datamonitor, takes a similar stance: "SIP was designed to reuse many existing protocols and thus enables interoperability across existing protocols and applications. This flexibility is key in an environment where modularity and fluidity are needed."

In her August 2005 report "SIP: The

Next Frontier For Converged Applications," Elizabeth Herrell, vice president at Forrester Research, writes that SIP is less complex due to its modular, building-block approach, making it better suited for Internet-application development. She also writes that SIP reuses Internet components that make it easier to create new applications and require fewer overheads in building new applications.

Already companies like VEGAS.com are reaping the benefits of SIP. The Sin City travel Web site turned to Interactive Intelligence for its Customer Interaction Center (CIC). The vendor's IP-based software with SIP option replaced VEGAS.com's existing PBX, increasing reliability, simplifying management, and adding the flexibility to create new applications. "We were taking tons and tons of calls—we just weren't taking them very well," says Rob Cate, contact center director for VEGAS.com. "Our existing system wasn't very reliable, and our existing technology group spent a lot of time scratching their heads, trying to figure out what was going on."

VEGAS.com went live with CIC Version 2.3.1 in April 2005, and upgraded to Version 2.4 in March 2006. Since its roll out VEGAS.com has seen impressive results. "SIP technology, with the phone calls and incorporating it with the emails, the Web-chat philosophy, and the faxing—all that embedded into one client is really helping us stop the whole transfer game," Cate says. "From a customer's perspective, all the information that an agent needs to help them is being handled right there, without having to be transferred around the company."

The company achieved an ROI in two months, and reduced costs associated with maintenance fees by 50 percent. VEGAS.com's agent-generated revenue increased by more than 87 percent. And it reduced error rates by 80 percent, equaling a savings of \$9,000 per month in error-reversal payouts, as a result of focusing less on policing agents and more on training.

SIP's presence capabilities are not limited to communicating with colleagues. Companies can also increase their effectiveness by taking SIP to customers. "If you're calling [your cable provider] on the phone, they might need to push a PDF to you to say, 'Here's what the back of your box looks like and here's where you plug in your cable,'" says Ian Jacobs, strategic analyst, contact center/CRM growth service, at consultancy Frost & Sullivan. "If the contact center knows that you have the ability to be reached through [particular touch points], it can send you to an agent who can do that push technology." In an outbound scenario, for example, a bank that believes there are fraudulent transactions associated with a customer's account can access the customer's presence through his SIP address, determine the most appropriate contact media, and quickly notify the customer.

THE END OF CTI?

The telephone remains the most common route for customers to get in touch with a service provider, especially for those seeking immediate attention. The introduction of SIP, however, does not

Four Tips for Considering SIP-based Applications

The potential impact of SIP in the contact center is evident, but that doesn't mean a company shouldn't conduct a thorough investigation of the available offerings.

Read on for some advice:

- **Focus on why** Take a good look at your business to understand how it can run more effectively and more efficiently. Then look for communication applications that solve the problems you have identified. "Don't start your purchasing from a protocol decision," says Todd Landry, senior vice president of Sphere Communications. "Start your [purchase reasoning] from focusing on why you want to solve certain problems in your business."
- **Consider application completeness** Understand how vendors are using SIP and the capabilities of the SIP applications they're delivering. Elizabeth Herrell, vice president at Forrester Research, writes in the report "SIP: The Next Frontier For Converged Applications" that SIP is "a component—vendors must incorporate it into intelligent business solutions that consist of several technologies and protocols. Judge vendors on the completeness of solutions that tie multimedia and application sharing together into a single medium."
- **Pay attention to integration** Examine how Web services are part of the communications solution. "While SIP is an important attribute of next-generation communication systems, the new marriages of Web-services capability with a SIP platform are enabling a whole level of business integration that wasn't really done before," Landry says.
- **Make sure the company's business rules are in order** Don't implement such technologies until you've thought about the cultural implications and worked out a plan to ease the transitions. Yes, presence initiatives can potentially spur first-contact resolution rates, but, Ian Jacobs, strategic analyst, contact center/CRM growth service at Frost & Sullivan, says that "knowledge workers reject being bothered all the time [and] customers complain when you ping them for things that they think are not urgent. Plan [for process upsets and worker adjustments] before you even get to implementing the technology." —C.B.

suggest that computer telephony integration (CTI) will disappear. “CTI is never going to go away. The ability to have third-party call control applications, where you’re able to influence call routing, call presentation, and call recording from other software applications, is

interconnectivity. The reality, though, is that there are still some wrinkles in the technology to be ironed out. For example, many functions have not yet been fully defined by the standards committee, Forrester’s Herrell writes. “This leaves it up to the equipment vendor to add extensions

set up to say, ‘Here are the permissions that I’m giving—this is okay for personal friends, this is okay for trusted vendors [and] urgent situations.’ That hasn’t really been worked out yet, and that’s not so much a technology issue as it is a cultural issue. This is an emerging technology, so it’ll get there, but right now you’ve got to be really careful about it.”

“CTI will continue for some time as a mature technology to provide communications integration among platforms and applications.”

critical,” says Rob Winder, vice president of business development at Genesys.

In a SIP-based contact center with pure IP, CTI is parked on the applications server, reducing complexity and cost by avoiding CTI links and integration costs, Hong says. “As enterprises look more closely at the benefits of intelligent call routing and applications that integrate contact center data with other cross-departmental systems—supply chain management, ERP, and SFA, for instance—the cost savings from not having to engage in numerous CTI integration projects is immense.”

Al Baker, system engineer with Avaya Converged Systems Division, contends the issue is not really about using SIP as a replacement for CTI. Rather, SIP will have an impact on certain aspects of CTI, providing complementary service and features available through SIP. According to Baker, the architecture of SIP networks is designed to leverage Internet models for load balancing, so that an overlay network for CTI-based network-level routing will no longer be necessary. SIP will also impact one of the most common uses for CTI, the synchronization of data like screen pops with a voice or other real-time communication sessions.

“CTI will continue for some time as a mature technology to provide communications integration among platforms and applications,” says Al Baker, vice president of eCRM solutions at Siemens Communications. “SIP provides some new possibilities, but it will take some time to evolve, mature, and reach mainstream adoption.”

TRACK TROUBLES?

Many are quick to trumpet SIP as the protocol panacea to problems associated with

to the standard to deliver the functionality required, which then renders SIP proprietary and limits interoperability.”

“Things have gotten dramatically better probably over [the past] 18 months,” says George Sullivan, CTO of Visitar, a provider of CRM and SFA solutions that link telephony capabilities with business apps. But “SIP implemented by vendor A and SIP implemented by vendor B is not always the same. So, until that gets squared away, there’s an issue associated with interoperability.”

Many of the third-party call control operations that are essential in a call center or other CTI environment can be made more difficult when SIP endpoints are in the picture, according to Avaya’s Baker. As the technology matures, application development platforms that offer programmatic and Web-service interfaces will help to insulate developers from some complexity, and leverage SIP as a way to expose third-party call control to a larger community of developers.

It is also important to note that SIP does not work alone. “SIP has been overhyped as *the one* protocol—it involves many,” Herrell writes. SIP requires other protocols or standards like Simple Object Access Protocol and Real Time Protocol to deliver communications solutions.

BUSINESS PROCESSES

There are also SIP-related privacy and cultural issues that take shape both externally and internally that must be addressed. “Just because I, as a consumer, say that I am available [through instant messaging], it doesn’t mean that I want to be contacted by [my bank],” Jacobs says. “There’s got to be a new paradigm

The same business process refinements must be developed for employees. Consider a contact center agent who sees there’s an expert within the company available via instant messaging. “The customer gets the problem resolved—first call resolution,” Jacobs says. “But how do you make it so that it’s not onerous for those knowledge workers—domain experts—within the company? Companies have to work out policies and procedures to ensure that those contacts to internal experts are only made when it’s absolutely necessary, when they are absolutely willing to get them.”

THE FUTURE OF SIP

Chief among many industry pundits’ projections for SIP is refined interoperability among products. “We see it increasing stabilization of all of the products that are ready for market,” SIP Forum’s Batson says. “In the long term SIP moves beyond just replacing existing telephony. It starts to [be] woven into the fabric of operational applications...as the infrastructure and the components all [are] in place and all the [application programming interfaces] become stabilized so that the applications can take advantage of SIP.”

As SIP advances within call center use, Forrester’s Herrell expects to see greater interoperability and the elimination of much proprietary technology, along with enhanced multimodal connections, device neutrality, and enhanced real-time functionality. “SIP is really having a [hand] in making real-time communications a reality,” Herrell writes. “It’s going to make businesses more conscious that they need to be more responsive to customers. It’s going to eliminate a lot of the excuses.”

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