

MSS Reborn: Introducing Microsoft Office Communication Server

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Microsoft has announced the end of Microsoft Speech Server as a standalone product. Instead, Microsoft will integrate it, along with Live Communication Server, into the new Office Communication Server (OCS). This announcement comes as no surprise; together, these products now become something greater than their component parts – a possible killer of CTI, PBX, IVR and ACD, as we know it. If OCS is successfully implemented, the team from Redmond will accelerate the migration of telecom into the IT fold. Nipping at their heels, a cadre of partners who simultaneously want to ride the coattails of Microsoft while bracing themselves for obvious competition.

MSS Is Dead! Long Live MSS!

In March 2004 at SpeechTek West keynote address, Bill Gates took the stage alongside Kai-Fu Lee to present Microsoft Speech Server to the voice community. Just two-and-a-half years later, Richard Bray took the stage at 2006's SpeechTek East to announce that Microsoft Speech Server is no more. Taking its place, under the Unified Communications banner, is Office Communication Server: the fusion of Microsoft Speech Server and Live Communication Server.

In order to make a smooth transition for existing implementers of Microsoft Speech Server (MSS), the 2004 release will be supported through 2007 to allow customers to migrate to the new Office Communication Server (OCS). The current MSS 2007 beta is expected to be powered down and testers will be shifted to the OCS beta that is currently scheduled for the first quarter of 2007.

A Unified Server for Unified Communications

As previously stated, Office Communication Server is the result of Microsoft's Unified Communications strategy, merging together the capabilities of Live Communication Server and Microsoft Speech Server. Microsoft Speech Server and Live Communication Server already share a common SIP stack, telephony API, basic architecture, development tool (Microsoft Visual Studio). Technically, combining the two pieces isn't any great feat.

Microsoft Speech Server (MSS) has been the company's voice self-service platform, supporting speech recognition and text-to-speech at a relatively high density. With approximately 96 ports in a standard server configuration it was positioned to be at parity with commercially available platforms from Genesys (including VoiceGenie), Avaya, Cisco, Intervoice and Nortel. MSS supports three primary development languages: .NET, VoiceXML and SALT and Visual Studio can author voice applications in any of these languages.

Live Communication Server (LCS) is one of the pieces of the Microsoft puzzle that is harder to understand because it lives at a murky layer in the telephony and IT stack and its multiple personalities. On one side, LCS is a corporate Instant Messaging (IM) platform – allowing secure IM traffic both 'inside' a corporate intranet, federated with other trusted companies and 'worldwide' over the public Internet. On the client-side is Office Communicator, with SIP/Softphone capabilities including scriptable screen pop.

Peeling back its layers, LCS is also a SIP router, which can take in SIP traffic from either a PBX or directly from IP Telephony Service Providers such as Vonage, ViaTalk, Broadvoice and others. It can route such traffic to the softphone that is resident in Office Communicator.

Both LCS and MSS are pure SIP solutions. For LCS to interface with standard telephony environments, two things are required. The first is a hybrid PBX that can receive standard TDM traffic and transmit SIP, or a media gateway needs to be placed between the PBX and the LCS server. The second element is a connector that bridges between the Live Communication Server and the PBX – either supplied by the PBX vendor as in the case of vendors such as Nortel and Mitel, or supplied by a third party such as Genesys with its Genesys Enterprise Telephony Server (GETS) to exchange presence and status (agent logged in, agent available, agent not available, agent on call, agent on break, etc...)

The OCS' Real World Scenarios: Radical Pricing

Microsoft has not yet stated the applications that will be provided with OCS, but plans to announce a list by the end of September. As of today, Microsoft doesn't currently plan to ship an out-of-the-box, full-featured PBX application or integration into Microsoft CRM. Yet all of the tools are available to build these types of applications with ease.

In 'greenfield' situations – especially for small and medium-sized enterprises – it's quite possible to implement OCS without the need for any traditional telephony components at all. Office Communicator with PC headsets can replace traditional phones, providing limited PBX functionality through basic routing and queuing. Integrating OCS with Exchange Server 12 – the voice-enabled version of Exchange Server – will provide a speech-enabled auto attendant and voicemail.

In enterprises and contact centers where PBXs are already installed, OCS will be deployed alongside (and integrated) to the PBX to provide enhanced functionality. This is where enterprise-level contracts can have a radical impact on pricing. Existing enterprise-level contracts are expected to cover the new Office Communication Server; enterprises will now have a free soft-phone option that can stem the need for expensive telephones at every desk.

As hardware, such as telephones, becomes depreciated, it's expected that many enterprises will shift to soft-phones anyway. Combined with a shift of telephony management into IT – who, of course, currently own the desktops – a Microsoft-supported solution will accelerate the process.

It's tempting to conclude that OCS could completely replace existing CTI and PBXs for enterprises and contact centers of any size. However, it would require a significant amount of development time and investment to match the expertise delivered by the switch/PBX vendors like Avaya and CTI vendors, such as Genesys, who have decades' worth of experience in the development and load-testing of their solutions. Microsoft's alliance with Nortel represents an effort to shorten the development time because it provides Microsoft with access to the PBX and real-time CTI-routing brain trust of one of the longest-standing companies in this space. For example, Opus Research would not be surprised to see an OCS-based version of Symposium authored by Nortel and sold jointly by both firms.

Distribution and Competition

A dedicated, 70-person strong Unified Communications sales and marketing organization is responsible for bringing the product to market both through partners and directly. Though Microsoft has not confirmed pricing, it's projected to be in the sweet spot of \$2,499 - \$2,999 per server, which should support approximately 100 self-service channels and hundreds of desktop clients. Sizing is expected to be available later this year at the time of the first public beta.

For the SME segment, Office Communication Server becomes not only one of the first affordable self service solutions, but also the first accessible self-service solution, being able to be purchased as a shrink-wrapped version from existing channels. For large enterprises, Microsoft has the challenge of developing a systems integration channel to bring OCS to market.

This is an ecosystem changing event. Enterprise infrastructure providers have to decide where their products "fit" in a newly defined solution stack. As more OCS solutions are deployed with PBX and CTI capabilities, valued partners such as Genesys, Siemens and Avaya should start wondering if such partnership is simply fulfill a future where Microsoft drives voice communication into the data center and current partners are relegated to support roles.

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