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REMOTE CONTROL SOFTWARE
DELIVERS CONTEXTUAL COLLABORATION:

WORKING TOGETHER IN REAL TIME

Improve productivity by helping users overcome
the challenges of time and distance

NOT LONG AGO, collaboration software was an exotic novelty. Now, it's hard to imagine a day at the office without it. E-mail, group calendars, version control software, and applications that automatically track changes from multiple contributors are indispensable tools that help users communicate more efficiently.

But while these familiar collaboration tools coordinate the work of many users on a single document, that work occurs in series—only one person can work on a document at a time. For example, a project manager might draft a schedule or set of product specifications and then save the document in a shared folder where other team members can comment on it or alter it.

The next wave of collaboration software breaks through that barrier. Real-time collaboration tools allow multiple users to work on a project at the same time. Some of the earliest examples of these tools are already widespread on many users' desktops. For instance, conversations that might once have been conducted through e-mail over the course of a few hours are now being handled in minutes with instant messaging (IM) and voice over IP (VoIP) clients.

Other real-time collaboration solutions are more ambitious, attempting to do more than simply add faster communication to the process. Web conferencing and electronic whiteboard solutions allow users to conduct meetings or seminars with audio, video, and diagrams or presentations. Some of these solutions provide graphic tools that allow contributors to mark up copies of documents placed on the shared whiteboard.

Demand for real-time collaboration software is already huge and it's expected to continue growing quickly. According to the June 2005 Gartner Dataquest report "Forecast: Web Conferencing and Team Collaboration Software, Worldwide, 2005-2009", written by Tom Eid, the worldwide Web conferencing and team collaboration market will reach \$810.8 million in 2006 and \$1.1 billion by 2008.

Both the familiar asynchronous and new real-time collaboration tools can make important contributions in the workplace, but there are still key areas where they fall short. For instance, many creative processes don't adapt well to asynchronous collaboration over e-mail or shared files. And while real-time collaboration software



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like Web conferencing can be useful, it generally requires that one or more participants make agreed-upon changes in an original document, which must then be circulated for approval.

Some experts are already looking forward to the next stage of collaboration, which some are calling contextual collaboration. Instead of sharing notes and changes on an electronic whiteboard, users collaborate on documents in real time within the applications that they work in every day: from word processors to illustration or design applications to spreadsheets. The advantage is that changes can be made directly in the document under discussion and immediately seen by all participants, reducing the need for independent revision, explanation, and rounds of review.

But while the benefits of collaboration software seem easy to comprehend, successfully implementing a collaboration solution is easier said than done. Organization-wide solutions ensure that everyone is using the same tools, which reduces compatibility issues and eases the strain on the IT department. But a one-size-fits-all solution risks alienating users who may avoid or simply ignore the tools, leaving the organization with an expensive white elephant and an impressive collection of user-designed workarounds.

At the other extreme, users at many organizations have driven the adoption of real-time collaboration tools like IM and VoIP clients. Grass-roots software campaigns can make it more likely that users actually get tools that they find useful. But allowing users to choose and install the software that they prefer can also raise both network security issues and helpdesk costs.

How can the users' need for flexibility and familiar tools be balanced with the enterprise need for standardization and security? Many organizations are finding that the solution to this new problem comes in a familiar shape: remote control software. A long-time favorite of IT departments for remote troubleshooting, remote control software short-circuits many of the difficulties surrounding collaboration software, connecting users quickly, easily, and in real time while allowing them

to work together using the applications that they're familiar with.

THE DRIVE BEHIND REAL-TIME COLLABORATION

Real-time collaboration is hard to get right, and it's reasonable to ask why it's necessary at all. The general answer is that there are some processes that won't support anything else. For years, companies have been patching the gaps with asynchronous tools, largely because they were all that was available. However, there are limits to what can be accomplished through e-mail and revised documents. For instance, take the problem of geographically separated project contributors. Even under the best circumstances, there are delays as each team member must read their e-mail to find out that a document is available for revision or review—delays that can be exacerbated if the collaborators are in different time zones. In some cases, asynchronous collaboration can make it more difficult to communicate, as collaborators must interpret comments and changes without the benefit of immediate feedback and ongoing dialog.

In fact, there are many types of projects that cannot support a feedback loop or "conversation" that extends over a period of hours or days. Asynchronous collaboration tools are well suited to communications or documents that depend on text to carry their meaning and for workflows that involve a single review cycle. But this is not the case for documents or projects that depend on formatted data or visual design such as illustrations, diagrams, page or packaging layouts, or even presentation slides. Collaboration across e-mail and shared files on these types of materials can be extremely difficult. For instance, just describing the piece of a complex diagram that needs to change can take several sentences, let alone explaining precisely how it needs to change.

The problem can be multiplied if the outcome of a project depends on the collaborators agreeing on an essentially aesthetic solution, as for an illustration or package design. In these cases, the design process frequently requires rapidly exploring multiple visual possibilities—the ability to get immediate feedback on an idea can mean the difference between a quick success that all stakeholders agree on and a design that nobody is happy with and that took a long time to complete.

Attempting to use asynchronous collaboration tools on design-heavy projects can also raise infrastructure issues, as the files that need to be shared are so large that it's impractical to pass them around the network, especially over e-mail. In addition, design files often require expensive, resource-hungry software to view and manipulate directly. The alternative is that the designer

SUCCESS STORIES: LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

A real-estate company found that it had difficulty coordinating the efforts of its three offices located in northern California. Key representatives had to regularly travel between the offices to coordinate its activities, despite regular e-mail and telephone communication. The company implemented Netopia's Timbuktu Pro remote control software, opening channels for real-time collaboration that reduced the need for travel and practically eliminated e-mail approval loops.

SUCCESS STORIES: HEAVYWEIGHT DESIGN

A large national advertising firm wanted to reduce the time necessary for its geographically separated design teams to create new materials. Teams relied on e-mail, file sharing, and mailed media to collaborate, but because of the visual nature of the work, days could be lost communicating even minor changes. The company implemented Netopia's Timbuktu Pro, and now design teams can work together on documents directly within design applications, testing changes and achieving consensus during a single collaboration session.

must create a read-only version in a widely available document format for each revision cycle, a time-consuming process. In these cases, it doesn't matter whether the collaborators are across the country or across the hall—asynchronous collaboration solutions won't solve the problem.

REAL-TIME CHOICES

As a result, the question for many businesses is not whether or not to deploy a real-time collaboration solution, but how best to do it. One strategy that companies commonly consider is a Web-based conferencing system.

Subscription-based Web conferencing is widely available and requires little up-front investment. Several vendors offer conferences on a subscription basis, or you can pay as you go per conference or per user. Subscription-based Web conferencing can be a good solution for sole-proprietor businesses or for consultants who rarely connect with the same person more than once or twice. But it might not be the best choice for organizations seeking to drive real-time collaboration into their regular workflows. The time and effort required to set up a connection through an external vendor can discourage users from using the tool. And, should users become comfortable with the tool and begin using it freely, the subscription costs can quickly mount.

Some vendors offer Web conferencing servers that companies can install and maintain themselves, eliminating subscription or per-use charges. However, these solutions have their own drawbacks. The first is the hardware expense—adding a Web conferencing server requires purchasing and maintaining a system that will likely lie fallow for weeks or months while users learn how to use the tools. And, as with the subscription services, successful adoption of the collaboration tool will increase costs, as an organization may have to add servers to deal with the increased user load. There is also the question of integrating the Web conferencing solution with the company's existing IT infrastructure

and asynchronous collaboration software, and whether or not the solution adequately supports all the operating system platforms used at an organization.

Also, whether delivered as a subscription or from an internal server, most Web conferencing solutions require serious effort on the part of the user to learn and ultimately don't deliver contextual collaboration. Users are generally restricted to whiteboards and the chat or voice tools provided by the Web conferencing applications. These tools generally require additional training, and are inevitably less capable than the applications that users are accustomed to working in.

Finally, Web conferencing applications often don't allow collaborators to actually complete work on a document during the collaboration session. Because the work occurs in a specialized shared space any agreed-upon changes must be transferred back into the actual documents under discussion, instead of tested out and approved on the spot.

REMOTE CONTROL

In order to overcome these challenges, many organizations are using remote control, screen-sharing software to achieve real-time contextual collaboration. Familiar to users and IT staff alike, remote control software delivers real-time contextual collaboration today. It's scalable, lightweight, secure, and allows users to focus on their projects instead of on their collaboration tools.

Timbuktu Pro from Netopia is remote control software that has been successfully used and proved for years by hundreds of organizations. The same features that earned it a sterling reputation as an indispensable IT support tool make it an ideal tool to deliver real-time contextual collaboration.

The basic concept is simple: a user invites visitors to share his or her desktop screen. For a simple presentation, the host user may choose to allow visitors to watch but not participate. However, if the host accords visitors control privileges the visitors can use their mouse and keyboard to control the host's system as if it were their own. By allowing visitors control privileges, a host and any number of visitors can work on a document simultaneously, making suggestions, agreeing on changes, brainstorming and experimenting until everyone is satisfied. At the end of the session, the document that the host saves can be truly complete and approved by everyone at the meeting: no review cycles or follow-up meetings are necessary.

For users and IT professionals alike, Timbuktu Pro delivers real-time, contextual collaboration with a minimum of effort. For users, that means allowing them to focus on the applications that they're accustomed to using. With Timbuktu Pro, users and visitors can collaborate on

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any document that they choose, whether within mainstream office applications, task-specific software like design, layout, and CAD applications, or proprietary applications that have been custom-developed for highly specialized tasks. For example, Rob Golding relies on Timbuktu Pro software in his work as a researcher. Golding takes advantage of the cross-platform capabilities of Timbuktu Pro, using a Macintosh iBook to control proprietary microscope imaging software on a PC running the Microsoft Windows operating system. "Timbuktu is an extremely worthy and capable remote access program," Golding wrote in a recent review for the Princeton Macintosh User Group (PMUG). "The most common tasks I tried were exchanging files, controlling a remote computer and observing a computer. In each case Timbuktu handled the actions flawlessly. Performance was pleasingly snappy, combined with an excellent feature set."

Timbuktu Pro also integrates with other collaboration tools that users are already comfortable with, like the Skype VoIP client. Timbuktu Pro clients with registered Skype addresses can initiate Timbuktu sessions directly from their Skype contacts list, expanding a Skype call into a full-volume, real-time collaboration session.

For IT professionals, "a minimum of effort" means that the solution is scalable, lightweight, and secure. Timbuktu Pro is a small, efficient client application that can be used across a broad range of hardware and is tuned for both Macintosh and Windows operating systems.

The Timbuktu Pro client can be installed on a minimum of two systems and utilized by a single user. Adding users to the system is a simple matter of adding more client applications. There is no upper limit on the number of clients that can successfully interact, and no

controlling server is necessary. The client application is self-contained and does not require an expensive, organization-wide commitment to a single network architecture or application suite. However, Timbuktu Pro Management Server offers enterprise-level distribution and policy management tools. The Timbuktu Pro Management Server can be put in place when the client software is first deployed or easily added on to an existing installation as desired.

The integration of the Timbuktu Pro and Skype clients also means less work for IT staff. The Timbuktu Pro sharing session data runs completely over the encrypted Skype tunnel, ensuring secure connections, even across partner networks. By connecting through the Skype tunnel Timbuktu automatically navigates network environments, traversing firewalls, routers and NAT devices to establish secure connections directly with other Skype clients. Timbuktu Pro further enhances security by providing IT staff with finely grained control over inbound and outbound user permissions, including the ability to craft customized access policies.

Real-time, contextual collaboration via remote control software opens exciting opportunities for many organizations. More than just accelerating the feedback loop, remote control software provides a way for users to produce better results by sharing the creative process as it occurs. It also dramatically reduces administrative overhead: when the collaboration session is done, the document is done. From an IT perspective, remote control software is a familiar tool that many organizations are already using for troubleshooting. For businesses seeking to add real-time contextual collaboration, remote control software provides a clear path forward. ■



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