

Cisco has introduced a unified digital communications solution for Irish businesses, generating enormous interest, writes **Alex Meehan**



Martin Buckley, IT manager, St James's Hospital: 'The end users have access to a lot more features now, which they can choose to use if they want'

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# Birth of unified communications

➔ Busy executives now have an increasing range of choice when it comes to choosing how they communicate at work. For some, e-mail is king for collaborative working, allowing them to send documents and messages easily. For others, the mobile phone is best, particularly when teamed up with a growing range of 3G data services.

For still others, the old fashioned landline continues to serve them best. But how can the communications infrastructure of a company handle the different demands placed upon it by the competing preferences of staff? After all, different people need to use communications technology to do different things in different ways – and in different places.

The answer lies in taking voice and data communications into the digital era through the use of internet protocol (IP). This brings them all on to the same converged network, facilitating the birth of unified communications.

"Using a system like our unified communications

suite, you can sit at a PC and communicate with any of your colleagues using whatever medium suits you best," said Karl McDermott, channel sales manager for Cisco Systems in Ireland.

"This could be SMS text messaging, internet instant messaging, a mobile phone call, a landline call, a video conversation or even a collaborative data session in which you run through presentations and edit documents together."

Cisco has combined all of these technologies into a single interface which allows users to see, at a glance, who is online and available to talk and what access technologies each person is able to use at that time.

"It will let you see that Karl is available and it shows that he can take a mobile phone conversation, a landline conversation or a video conference call. So you just pick the one that suits your purpose best. We can have instantaneous communication with that person in whatever medium is most appropriate.

"Sometimes a simple



Richard Barry, IT manager for networks and communications, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment

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phone call will be the best option, but, perhaps, during the call I may want to show you something, say a box design. I can click on a button and escalate the call up to a video conferencing session and immediately, using a web cam, you can see the box while we talk about it.

"To go further, let's say we're talking about and looking at the box, but I know that there's a guy in our US office who is an expert on that type of box. Using the unified communications suite, I can see if he is online and what kind of communications he can currently accept. At desk or

away, and if so, is he available on the mobile phone? I can conference him in at the click of a button and bring him into the call," McDermott said.

The system works using a 'presence' server, which keeps track of which users are online and what access devices they are using. Because the system works with IP, it can effectively extend the service to any device that is capable of running IP applications, such as the latest generation of 3G mobile phones.

"Normally when executives are on the road using their mobile phones, they've no access to any-

thing other than phone link. However, if they have a 3G phone, then that phone can ping back to the presence server and let their colleagues know they're available for voice calls," said McDermott.

"If they have video capabilities on their mobile handset and have opted to receive video calls, the presence server will let others know that. In this case, the phone is using the mobile network provider's data network to talk back to the corporate network and the presence server. It becomes a node on the corporate network," he said.

This ability to go from voice to video and to collaborative document editing and back is designed to liberate end users from the limitations of any individual communications technology. "This isn't really about technology, it's about simple and straightforward collaboration and communication. Not everyone is a technical expert or whizz-kid, so this has to be usable by everybody," said McDermott.

Of course Cisco recognises that a complete installation of the unified

communications suite isn't going to suit every company.

"Sometimes a phone call or an e-mail is the ideal way to communicate if all you need to do is have a voice conversation or send a document, but if you need more than one person and you need to be able to show people something – a box, a document, whatever – as you talk about it and work on it, this is extremely useful," said McDermott.

There are many examples of companies, institutions and government departments using aspects of Cisco's unified communications suite to suite their individual purposes. A good example is St James's Hospital in Dublin, which uses a high speed gigabit network backbone to operate its voice and data systems.

Martin Buckley, IT manager for St James's Hospital, said: "The network infrastructure we have reaches up to 4,000 staff or points-of-patient-care, delivering information either through PC connections or phone handsets using VoIP."