

The World is my Cubicle: Web services: Small business made large

By Alan Thwaites, posted May 01, 2002



Personal computing has come a long way in a short time. A measure of that truth is the way in which critical new technologies are now a matter of evolution rather than revolution. The latest Next Big Step is probably something few computer users have heard of yet. It's called Web services, and is being developed, marketed and promoted by the big guns of the computing world, as well as some savvy smaller players.

In a nutshell, Web services is a set of technologies that gets around the restrictions of competing hardware platforms, operating systems and programming languages by using a Web browser as an interface and the Internet as the connection between services and users. Currently, Web services is very much a "behind the scenes" technology, but it's poised to become very big indeed. That's because Web services offers users an inexpensive version of outsourcing -- companies using Web services won't need to buy (or build) and maintain their own in-house technologies for e-business applications, but will access them over the Internet, using a Web browser interface and universally accepted Internet security standards.

Most visible among Web services technologies is Microsoft's .Net initiative. .Net is an add-on run-time environment that runs on Microsoft's Windows 2000 operating system. It is based on existing Internet standards such as XML (eXtensible Markup Language, an advanced Web design language) and SOAP (Simple Object Access Protocol, an XML-based protocol for exchanging information) and is the basis of Microsoft Web services applications such as MS Passport, which automates the process of verifying the identity of individual Internet users.

IBM has been in the Web services game for a little bit longer, with its WebSphere family of products. WebSphere tools are based on J2EE (Java 2 Platform, Enterprise Edition), with the result that tools developed and marketed under WebSphere will serve users across divergent platforms.

But .Net and WebSphere, excellent technologies though they are, exist at the high end of the market. What's particularly exciting for the rest of us (assuming that most of the readers of this column aren't big time enterprise IT types) is that affordable Web services offerings are increasingly coming on the market for the rest of us.

One of those offerings is Pathway Communications' Webdesk (see www.pathcom.com/webdesk/). It's certainly affordable -- a \$25 setup fee, and then \$14.99 per month for a five seat (user) package. For that, Webdesk offers a business-oriented communication and collaborative tool bundle that includes a calendar/scheduler, contact manager, file sharing, chat, internal e-mail, polls, discussion groups and more. It's aimed at the small- to medium-sized business that doesn't need or want (or perhaps can't afford) a complex and pricey set of groupware technologies. The good news is that it does much the same job.

I've been testing Webdesk for the past couple of weeks. I share my Webdesk space with three colleagues. As is the case with many businesses these days, we're geographically separated, and yet we share common projects and need to coordinate our schedules. Files need to be passed back and forth, ongoing tasks need to be harmonized and meeting agendas need to be thrashed out before they happen. If we can get that kind of work done, then our face-to-face time is more efficient and productive.

So far, the results have been very promising. Webdesk offers all the tools we need to collaborate effectively. The only tools needed are an Internet connection. We can sync our Outlook Calendars, Contacts and ToDo lists with corresponding applications on Webdesk, which takes away the need to double-key entries. We've been able to review and revise documents and databases, engage in online chat sessions and coordinate our schedules on a real-time basis.

If Web services is the next step in computing, I'm all for it. Long live the evolution! *

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