Google Talk: Is It Ready for the Enterprise?

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This report discusses the Google Talk instant messaging product and its suitability for enterprises. This is important for companies which are looking at alternatives to IBM and Microsoft for messaging and collaboration.

Key Findings

- Google Talk IM is based on the Extensible Messaging and Presence Protocol (XMPP) and Jingle protocols.
- To get enterprise-level support for Google Talk, companies have to purchase the full Google Apps Premier Edition (GAPE) suite.
- Enterprise users are already using the Google Talk and Gmail free services.

Recommendations

- Enterprises making collaboration decisions should include the Google Apps portfolio as part of an effort to compare the economics of their current incumbent provider vs. similar services provisioned in the cloud.
WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Enterprise instant messaging (IM) has emerged to become an infrastructure component in enterprises. While we believe Google Talk is a promising offering, we do not expect it to displace, in large enterprises, entrenched infrastructures from either Microsoft or IBM. However, if prices from IBM and Microsoft continue to rise, this could change. Google Talk is not a stand-alone enterprise IM offering, but along with Gmail we believe it is a good seeding strategy to make GAPE a more compelling offering for businesses.

STRATEGIC PLANNING ASSUMPTION(S)

By 2015, Google will have a unified communications and collaboration (UCC) offering based on the Google Talk network.

ANALYSIS

Google Talk is a relatively new entrant in the IM space, only having been around since August 2005. It is Google's real-time communications and collaboration tool suite for supporting IM, presence, audio and video (note that video chat is only available in the embedded Gmail offering). It is based on Jabber's Extensible Messaging and Presence Protocol (XMPP) and the Jingle protocol for session initiation and voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), which may limit integration with unified communications or IP telephony vendors which are predominantly based on Session Initiation Protocol (SIP). The Google Talk client currently only supports the Windows platform. There is no support for Linux except via other clients such as Pidgin or Google Talk Gadget that access the Google Talk network. For Mac OS X, Google Talk is also supported via a Gmail plug-in inside of a browser on Windows XP and on Intel Mac OS X with Intel Processors. Pidgin and the iChat client also can access the Google Talk network on Mac OS X.

After the initial launch in 2005, demand for Google Talk was not great in comparison to other consumer IM services. In 2008, Google added integration with AIM, which allowed users to import their AIM contacts and to communicate with AIM users automatically. The top tier consumer IM services in terms of usage numbers is still AOL/AIM, Yahoo Messenger and Microsoft's Windows Live Messenger (formerly MSN Messenger). Integrating with AIM gave Google access to the vast AOL clearinghouse network of users. Both AOL and Yahoo have federated partnerships currently with the leading enterprise IM vendors, IBM and Microsoft. The consumer IM networks are still the predominant IM services used in enterprises. The issue that still plagues these services for enterprise use is security vulnerabilities.

Let's Talk Protocols

XMPP-based IM clients like Google Talk cannot natively support peer-to-peer multimedia interactions. The XMPP protocol does not have support for peer-to-peer multimedia interactions so Google had to extend it with the Jingle protocol to enable the Google Talk client to support voice chat and peer-to-peer interoperability over various network configurations. Google's specific implementation and extensions to Jingle extends XMPP to support voice and video streaming and file sharing. Jingle really emerged from the XMPP community to connect XMPP users over a VoIP network. While SIP is the most popular signaling protocol for enterprise unified communications systems, backed by Cisco, IBM and Microsoft, Jingle support is relegated only to Google and the Jabber XMPP community of users. With Cisco's acquisition of Jabber in 2008, commitment to Jingle will be in question as Cisco's own unified communication (UC) solutions are SIP-based.
Google Talk in the Enterprise

As of October 2008, Google's enterprise suite, GAPE, includes Gmail, Google Talk, audio and video chat and other office productivity tools. By itself, Google Talk is free but for the enterprise-version, the $50 per user per year GAPE suite is required. We doubt enterprises will pay $50 for Google Talk itself. That said, when combining low-end document creation tools that are part of the Google GAPE offering with Google Talk IM and the enhanced 99.99% uptime service-level agreements, it is an attractive software as a service price point. Enterprises should note that audio and video chat performance is also determined by network bandwidth issues that are often out of the control of the application provider.

Google Talk vs. the Competition

Enterprise UCC suppliers are looking for ways to leverage additional income from their clients and one of those ways could be price increases for voice components of enterprise class IM products. Compared to Microsoft or IBM respective IM offerings, the $50 per user price point of Google Talk may look attractive to small to midsize businesses (SMBs). As part of usual due diligence in collaboration technology procurement, our clients are increasingly inquiring about Google's offerings in comparison to Microsoft and IBM. Since both IBM and Microsoft charge over $100 per user for IM that includes voice and audio support, we are starting to see enterprises use the free version of Google Talk. IT departments should evaluate the GAPE version due to better administration for groups and directory import capabilities. This has not translated into deeper penetration of Google offerings in enterprises, but Google has a high degree of "mind share."

While Google promotes its own office productivity tools in Google Apps, Google Talk presence is not able to be integrated into office applications and e-mail clients (although it is used by other Google applications and can easily be integrated into any Web application).

Google Talk vs. Gmail

There is some confusion regarding the chat capabilities in Google Talk and Gmail. Google Talk is the desktop chat/IM application while Gmail is the Internet e-mail service with a Web interface for chat. Gmail is integrated with the Google Talk network and has embedded video and text chat functionality. The Google Talk client does not support video currently. While logged on to Gmail, users can use the Gmail chat feature for instant messaging, buddy status notification and chat logging right inside the Gmail application. Also Gmail allows for group chat which the Google Talk client does not. Google has been adding capabilities to Google Talk over time by extending functionality (see Note 1).

Toward Unified Communications

Within Google Talk, users can now call people or leave them a voice message which shows up in their Gmail account. However, even with VoIP support, Google Talk is many iterations away from being a unified communications platform. However, Google does have a partnership with Avaya to integrate its IP office telephony product with Google Talk, targeted at SMBs. There is also federation with IBM's Lotus Sametime IM product via the Lotus Sametime gateway. Third-party vendors are starting to develop Jingle-to-SIP gateways to expand capabilities, but activity is minimal. We believe Google will continue to add functionality toward UC, but it's challenge to Cisco, IBM and Microsoft will be figuring out how to provision UCC services in the cloud.

While Google Talk supports audio and video as does its consumer IM counterparts, the fact that major vendors such as IBM and Microsoft are charging for extended voice capabilities, may continue to make Google Talk compelling for enterprise users to use in a complementary fashion.
Web Conferencing vs. Google Docs

Unlike Microsoft and IBM, Google does not offer a Web conferencing option. However, users can connect to documents and collaborate on them or just view them. This basic functionality is often what Web conferencing is typically used for. With the acquisition of the Web and video conferencing assets of Marratech, a Swedish-based company, Google will potentially integrate the conferencing features into Google Apps. Google Talk will eventually be integrated to enable a click-to-conference feature. Google has been using the Marratech technology internally and has not communicated when it might be integrated into Google Apps. Adding conferencing capability will be a compelling feature for companies considering Google Apps.

Product Strategy

- Google is using a seeding strategy with Google Talk as a free consumer tool to increase adoption of GAPE.
- Position Google Talk as the real-time enabling capability of Google cloud services.
- Use the cloud delivery model as a low barrier to entry into a market dominated by IBM and Microsoft.

Strengths

- Google Talk itself is free for users providing simple text and voice chat.
- Video chat support is embedded in Gmail.
- Based on XMPP which is an extensible protocol for developers.

Challenges

- Relative newcomer to the IM space which has already established leaders will make it difficult for it to break into the space.
- Lack of recognition of Google as an "enterprise class" player in this market.
- Assuring enterprises Google Talk is a secure alternative to other enterprise IM products.
- Convincing enterprises to invest in the full GAPE suite to get enterprise-level support for Google Talk.

Competitive Analysis

For a description of competitors, see "MarketScope for Instant Messaging, 2008."

The main competitors Google face are:

- IBM
- Microsoft
- Cisco (with Jabber acquisition)

The main competitors have history on their side with a large stable of customers. Google will have to play from behind in this market as it continues to consolidate around a few large players. In the case of IBM and Microsoft, they are the incumbent e-mail infrastructure providers in a
majority of organizations. This gives them good leverage for their respective IM platforms to be the first choice in becoming a part of the messaging and communications environment in those organizations. Also, both IBM and Microsoft are also pursuing cloud collaboration and communications services, which was Google’s entry into this space. Google has been doing it longer and has a better understanding of cloud dynamics.

Consider This Product When

The organization is evaluating cost-effective collaboration offerings that can be provisioned in the cloud. SMBs may find this a suitable solution and alternative to a full on-premises IM platform from either IBM or Microsoft. Also, Google Talk the free IM service can be used without any financial investment. However, for enterprise security purposes, there should be a layer of IM hygiene services to secure it.

Consider Alternatives When

There is already a heavy on-premises infrastructure investment in another provider’s platform and the price of getting the full GAPE suite just for Google Talk is redundant.

RECOMMENDED READING

"MarketScope for Instant Messaging, 2008"

Note 1
Google Talk Functionality

Text

Gtalk has enhanced its capabilities with text to SMS support and also a Group Chat option, which is a Google Talk gadget.

Audio and Video Chat

Google added voice and video support in November 2008. In our tests, we found the audio and video call features easy to use. The audio quality was very good, and the video quality was more than fine in a point-to-point scenario.
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