

# Getting connected cuts time, costs

Integrating voice, data and messaging eliminates wasteful paperwork. **Interviewed by John Burnell**

**E**merging technologies make it not only possible, but practical, to slash telecommunications expenses by using existing data networks to carry voice calls; eliminate paperwork and its storage and handling expenses through digital imaging; and make more business information available to employees, customers and colleagues around the world.

Skoda, Minotti & Co. helps clients do the same.

*Smart Business* spoke with James P. Sacher, CPA, who leads Skoda Minotti's Information Technology (IT) Consulting Group, for guidance about technology trends and to learn which proven technologies hold strong efficiency and cost-saving potential for businesses.

## What are some promising new technologies available to business?

There are three that can help many businesses: Voice-over-Internet Protocol (VoIP) communications; Microsoft's SharePoint Services; and wireless data — beyond using a laptop at an Internet café.

VoIP blurs the line between telecommunications and network infrastructure because voice and data share the same network. Companies can take advantage by using their existing networks to carry phone calls — including long distance calls — without any drop in service quality. VoIP also makes it easier to video conference.

Adopting VoIP will help lower overall telecommunications expenses, especially for companies with multiple offices. One of our clients will save almost \$200,000 over three years. That's a pretty dramatic example, but many businesses can find significant savings.

SharePoint is a new way for people to share and collaborate. It includes a desktop portal application for users, plus a server that accesses information from different enterprise and external systems.

What sets SharePoint apart from other collaboration tools is its ability to integrate data from multiple sources, and to automatically push information or alerts out to people. It also has great internal search capabilities. If I'm working on a project and need a document but I'm not sure where it



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is, SharePoint will search all my company's systems and can show me all the documents, e-mails, customer records and other resources related to the project.

The third big opportunity is wireless data. Now it's easy for people to get e-mail and attachments on their cell phones. What will surprise a lot of people is how affordable these systems are. You get unlimited use for \$35 or \$40 a month, and can do much more than e-mail. Microsoft Windows Pocket PC handheld computers and 'smart' phones can connect wirelessly and create a lot of opportunities to eliminate paperwork.

## What is remote access, and how can companies benefit from it?

Remote access is a related concept. It's about making employees as functional anywhere as they are when working from their desktop. When I'm at home or at a client site, I can connect to our systems and access all the same information as I can at the office.

## How can companies keep their data safe while improving access?

Wireless and remote access are becom-

ing mainstream technologies, but implementing isn't easy because of all the details. Security is one of the biggest considerations. If you're opening up another door to your enterprise, you'd better be sure you can put a lock on it. Firewalls are essential.

The best thing companies can do is develop sound security policies and actively enforce them. Laptops, PDAs and memory cards get lost all the time, so good policy options include not allowing employees to store customer information on these devices, or to require encryption of all stored data.

Companies also need to set and enforce policies to prevent the use of unlicensed software. It can be a huge liability due to the possibility of a potentially costly software audit. There is software available to automatically inventory what is in use and match it against what is licensed.

## What is paperless digital technology, and what are some of its benefits?

A lot of companies already scan and index forms for easy retrieval. Why not go to the next level, which is to start with electronic forms and go completely paperless? That makes it much faster to search for specific documents and to find content within a document. One of the other benefits is helping companies follow their own document management policies.

## What is data integration?

Data integration unifies information from multiple sources — such as customer relationship management (CRM), billing and inventory systems — to give a total view of the customer or the operation. It's similar to the SharePoint concept. The goal is that data is only entered one time and becomes available to any user or application that needs it.

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