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Preferred Partner

Ispirian, Creative Labs realize the importance of trusted partnerships between equipment vendors and value-added resellers.

With so many value-added resellers (VARs) in the market today, it's tough for businesses and consumers to decide from whom to purchase their technology solutions. Many VARs offer the same products, so what separates a truly, trusted IT partner from a typical, run-of-the-mill VAR?

The most obvious answer to that question is service. IT solution providers who staff knowledgeable technicians and engineers and provide round-the-clock support are usually the most successful solution providers.

Another important criteria to look at when selecting a solution provider is the company's relationship with its equipment vendors. Many vendors have created partner programs. Depending on the vendor, these programs can range from having stringent requirements to a simple agreement.

Vendor/VAR relationships benefit all involved parties. Vendors get the satisfaction of knowing their products are being advertised and marketed in the way they were meant to be. In addition, many vendors do not sell direct to consumers so creating solid partnerships with VARs is a must.

On the other hand, partner programs enable VARs to provide special promotions that non-partner VARs may not be privy to.

Not to mention, the mere ability to

advertise as a "Preferred Partner of Company XYZ" can hold a lot of water with consumers. Most importantly though, being partnered with equipment vendors means that a VAR always has a dedicated vendor representative working as an advocate for them and their clients.

One such person is Jacob Boyd, a channel account executive for Creative Labs. In February, Creative Labs began its Preferred Partner Program, and one of the first people to realize the benefits associated with such a partnership was Tom Smith, president of Ispirian Incorporated.

Ispirian to offer its clients high-quality digital entertainment – anywhere, anytime.

While Creative is primarily known for its consumer-oriented products, Boyd explains the company is breaking into other areas.

"We're now moving into the business-to-business arena as well," said Boyd. "We've built upon the popularity and demand of our PC audio success to include graphics, wireless connectivity, computer telephony integration, communications and videoconferencing."

Furthermore, Creative is a hardware partner with Microsoft. As a result,

"The biggest benefit to being a Creative Labs Preferred Partner is that you have a person acting as your dedicated account executive that works with you and your distributor representative so that you have an advocate at the manufacturer."

As a Creative Labs Preferred Partner, Ispirian is able to take advantage of promotional discounts and marketing funds. In addition, Ispirian is first to know when Creative Labs is releasing new product or information concerning existing solutions.

"The biggest benefit to being a Creative Labs Preferred Partner is that you have a person acting as your dedicated account executive that works with you and your distributor representative so that you have an advocate at the manufacturer," said Boyd.

Famous for its Sound Blaster and for launching the multimedia revolution, Creative is now driving digital entertainment on the PC platform with products like its highly acclaimed Zen portable MP3 and video players. The company's innovative hardware, proprietary technology, applications and services leverage the Internet, enabling

its MP3 and video players are part of the "Plays For Sure" initiative, and the company's Zen Portable Media Center device offers a Windows Media Center type menu system and synchs with the Microsoft Media Center library.

Leveraging in-house technology, partnerships and value-added investments, Creative markets its solutions to consumers and system integrators, with worldwide distribution through traditional marketing channels, as well as other means. For St. Louis-area customers interested in Creative Labs' products, Boyd recommends Ispirian.

"As far as Ispirian goes, they have been really great to work with," Boyd said. "They can offer any product Creative makes and they are very knowledgeable. Tom and I have a good relationship and anytime he needs to locate something, all he has to do is pick up the phone and I'm here for him."

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Blade Servers Cut Costs

Organizations with six or more servers could benefit from blade technology.

You wouldn't think small businesses would be affected by "server sprawl" but they can be. Many small companies that acquired their first file server several years ago have added other file and application servers over time, such that the computer room is a tangled mess of machines and wires. And, typically, these servers are grossly underutilized.

Blade servers offer a cure for server sprawl, and now several manufacturers are making blade technology more affordable and easier to deploy for small to midsize businesses (SMBs). Blade servers are self-contained computers on a single motherboard that are mounted in a chassis that includes the power supply, network and I/O connections, cooling fan and other gear. Up to 15 blade servers can be installed in a single chassis. Blade servers can help SMBs operate more efficiently, grow flexibly and better control costs by simplifying multi-server environments.

"Many SMB owners are realizing that IT, specifically server solutions, can help them tackle common business challenges such as controlling costs, improving business processes and increasing employee productivity," said Doug Vaughan, vice president of marketing, Small and Medium Business Unit, HP.

Increase Efficiency

The blade concept was born in the Web server environment, where racks upon racks of low-end servers sat prepared to handle peak traffic. Blade servers provided a solution to the rising costs of space in these data centers. By eliminating redundant equipment and setting the motherboard on its side, blade servers enabled ISPs to pack more servers in the Web server farm.

Few SMBs are concerned about server density. However, the space race that set manufacturers on the path of developing space-optimized servers has had unexpected benefits. Blade servers enable SMBs to maximize efficiency while reducing the total cost of ownership (TCO) of their information infrastructures.

Traditional servers are inefficient when it comes to allocating resources. As a result, many organizations overbuild their infrastructures to handle peak loads — in some cases as little as 5 percent of server capacity is used in off-peak times. The inevitable result is that TCO increases and efficiency suffers due to wasted capacity and the cost of managing ever-more-complex systems.

Blade servers reduce TCO and

increase operational efficiency by creating a pool of server resources that can be allocated dynamically. If more server capacity is needed, adding blades to the chassis is a task any technician can accomplish easily. Management software

"Many SMB owners are realizing that IT, specifically server solutions, can help them tackle common business challenges such as controlling costs, improving business processes and increasing employee productivity."

built into the system can even configure the server on the fly. According to HP, it takes about four hours to install and configure a traditional server, but only 10 minutes to install a blade.

Reduce Overhead

Because blade servers share common resources — including power, cooling and cabling — they reduce energy consumption and other facilities costs. A rack of 32 servers would have 32 power supplies and 64 cooling fans — redundant equipment that adds to the cost of each server and wastes energy. In contrast, a single set of redundant power supplies and fans can support multiple blade servers in a single chassis. Blade servers also conserve energy and reduce heat through lower-power CPUs and small onboard disk drives.

Infrastructure and cabling costs are reduced through blade computing. That same rack of 32 servers would have at least 96 cables providing power, network and serial connections, resulting in the rat's nest of cables that clog most data centers. Because power, networking and I/O interconnects are built into the blade server chassis, two chassis holding 15 blades each would require just 10 cables.

Of course, reducing administration costs is the primary factor in lowering TCO — well over half of IT spending goes toward staffing and operations. By simplifying installation and maintenance, blade computing enables technicians to handle many administration tasks.

Enable Growth

Blade computing is not for every environment. The benefits are best realized where multiple servers are required. While the incremental cost of each blade server is lower than that of a rack-mount system, the initial cost of the blade server chassis is higher because it contains power, cooling, connectivity and management software for up to 15 servers.

According to Sun Microsystems, an organization replacing five servers with a comparable blade system will break even on the initial capital outlay. HP places the breakeven point at six servers. Of course, the cost efficiencies increase as more blades are added to the chassis.

According to a recent Gartner user survey in North America, nearly 20 percent of small and low-end midsize businesses cited plans to purchase a server blade, while 35 percent of upper-end midsize businesses cited plans to purchase a blade server.

"We believe that the blade value proposition is very attractive to the SMB market, especially with respect to ease of management and ease of deployment," said John Enck, vice president of Server Selection, Gartner.

Blade servers are ideally suited for companies looking to grow their infrastructure incrementally, consolidate to a standardized platform or build a new business with limited resources. They help reduce management costs, cabling costs and power consumption to provide a lower TCO than traditional rack-mount servers, and thus a better return on IT investment. They also provide affordable scalability with the simple addition of new server blades and enclosures as the company's needs grow.

Developed to increase server density, blade computing would appear to be a solution without a problem. However, if reducing costs and increasing efficiency are important to your organization, blades just might give you the edge.

A Fresh Approach to the Data Center

Blade servers aren't just for server consolidation. Many organizations are finding they are well suited to enterprise, grid and Web services applications that demand throughput over raw processing power.

Online grocer FreshDirect recently deployed a blade system to power its 24x7, revenue-generating data center operation. FreshDirect uses the system to run several mission-critical applications, including its storefront Web site and customer relationship management (CRM), delivery administration, payment processing and business intelligence systems.

Currently serving Manhattan and locations in Queens and Brooklyn, FreshDirect is rapidly expanding delivery across New York City's five boroughs and beyond. The company's mission is to revolutionize the way fresh food is sourced, processed and delivered direct to consumers. The company has more than 200,000 customers and has fulfilled more than 1,000,000 orders since opening for business in September 2002.

FreshDirect evaluated several alternatives to its legacy systems, but determined that blade computing delivered the high performance and scalability

it needed to accommodate its expected rapid growth. In particular, the solution has improved the performance and availability of FreshDirect's Web site, while lowering costs.

Since 99.98 percent of FreshDirect's customer orders are placed online, it is imperative that the company's site is up and running at all times. Prior to installing the blade system, the company deployed redundant equipment to ensure availability, putting time, money and resources into hardware that was rarely used.

Now FreshDirect has a single failover blade for all applications running on the system, dramatically reducing server count and improving overall utilization. By replacing legacy servers with blade servers, FreshDirect has saved \$1.2 million in software-license and annual service fees.

The blade system has also reduced customer checkout times from an average of 14 seconds to just 1.5 seconds, even during peak traffic. The blade system is handling three times more traffic than the legacy system and still has the headroom to support FreshDirect's expansion goals.

Virus Damage Getting Worse

Damage to business IT systems caused by viruses continues to grow, according to a new survey. IT systems were hit with 50 percent more viruses in 2004 than they were in 2003, according to a survey of 300 companies and government agencies sponsored by McAfee, Microsoft, Trend Micro and other vendors, and conducted by ICSA Labs, a division of Cybertrust, Inc.

Respondents to the Virus Prevalence Survey reported 392 incidents per 1,000 machines, and when 25 or more PCs or servers were infected, system downtime increased by 12 percent in 2004. In addition, the time it took to recover from the infections last year increased by seven person days, year over year, and the cost of recovery averaged \$130,000. Both of those figures are 25 percent higher than in 2003. Ninety-one percent of those surveyed say the threat from malicious code is getting worse; no one says it's lessening.

Texas Sues Vonage

The state of Texas recently filed a lawsuit against voice over IP provider Vonage, claiming the company misled consumers about its 911 emergency services. In addition, the state of Michigan is threatening a similar lawsuit, claiming that Vonage does not make it clear that users need to manually set up their 911 service.

The Texas lawsuit stems from an incident in which a Houston teenager was unable to get through to 911 on a Vonage VoIP phone line after two men invaded her home and shot both her parents.

Meanwhile, newly appointed Federal Communications Commission Chairman Kevin Martin said he would quickly propose a rule that Internet-based telephone providers must offer true emergency 911 services. Martin said he would send a proposal to the other three FCC commissioners so they could vote on it soon.

Cookies Crumbling, Study Says

Jupiter Research recently released a study that found users are deleting cookies at such high levels that Web measurement is in danger of being a pointless exercise. The study found that 17 percent of consumers delete cookies weekly, 12 percent monthly and 10 percent daily — behavior that cripples sites' ability to track users and make critical marketing measurements.

The report found that 58 percent of users run anti-spyware software (which deletes cookies), 56 percent clear cache (which contains cookies) and 52 percent manually delete cookies.

"Given the number of sites and applications that depend heavily on cookies for accuracy and functionality, the lack of this data represents significant risk for many companies," says Eric T. Peterson, analyst at Jupiter Research. "Because personalization, tracking and targeting solutions require cookies to identify Web visitors over multiple sessions, the accuracy of these solutions has become highly suspect, especially over longer periods of time."

Mozilla Growing Strong

The Mozilla Foundation recently announced that its popular open-source browser Firefox had passed the 50 million download mark since its November release. The group attributes the popularity of its browser to the evangelism of the nearly 100,000 people participating in its "Spread Firefox" campaign.

Web-analytics firm OneStat.com has reported that Firefox has captured 8.69 percent of the global browser market share.

Much of the interest in Firefox has been driven by repeated security holes found in Microsoft's Internet Explorer, which remains the most popular browser with a commanding a global market share of 86.63 percent. Microsoft is also expected to launch a massive security drive that will be incorporated in Internet Explorer 7.0 later this year.

It's All So Clear Now



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Mighty Mites

New breed of 2.5-inch hard disks packs a punch.

The 1960 Olympic Games in Rome served as a coming-out party for a bold 18-year-old Louisville boxer named Cassius Clay, who would later change his name to Muhammad Ali and win the world heavyweight title three times. Behind the scenes, a technology star was born at the same time.

The world's first hard disk storage system was used for calculating the results at the 1960 Games. Invented by IBM a few years earlier, the RAMAC (Random Access Method of Accounting and Control) was twice the size of a refrigerator and featured 50 two-foot-diameter disks holding 5MBs of data.

The same basic technology lies at the heart of computer storage today, although hard disks continue to shrink in size, gain

transaction processing. Smaller drives are denser, meaning administrators can generally pack about 50 more drives per server. The smaller size also means the devices consume less power and are more reliable than 3.5-inch disks.

HP announced in April that it is partnering with leading disk drive vendors Fujitsu, Hitachi and Seagate to accelerate adoption of next-generation SFF 2.5-inch disks for servers and storage. These disks hold great promise for systems featuring multiple disks, or where power and cooling are significant issues. They also will support evolving standards, such as serial-attached SCSI (SAS).

"HP is proud to have all the leaders in hard drive disk technology closely aligned with our strategy, helping to deliver innovations to customers that will

"New breeds of 2.5-inch high-performance drives will enable evolving enterprise systems to deliver enhanced speed and reliability while reducing power and space requirements. The shift to a new enterprise HDD form factor is inevitable and inescapable. Gartner predicts that 2.5-inch enterprise class drives will be the predominant HDD form factor in the multi-user environments in 2007."

storage capacity and increase transfer speeds. The 3.5-inch form factor has been the standard for hard disks since the early 1990s, but industry watchers say a new crop of 2.5-inch disks is setting the stage for another significant shift in storage technology.

"Space and power are increasingly regarded as corporate assets that must be managed and preserved, and more and more users are demanding that servers and storage systems take up less physical space and consume less power," said John Monroe, research vice president at Gartner Dataquest. "New breeds of 2.5-inch high-performance drives will enable evolving enterprise systems to deliver enhanced speed and reliability while reducing power and space requirements. The shift to a new enterprise HDD (hard disk drive) form factor is inevitable and inescapable. Gartner predicts that 2.5-inch enterprise class drives will be the predominant HDD form factor in multi-user environments in 2007."

Industry watchers say small form factor (SFF) hard drives provide a number of advantages over traditional 3.5-inch drives, including the ability to do online

improve the performance of their IT infrastructures," said Paul Perez, HP's vice president of Storage, Networks and Infrastructure, Industry Standard Servers. "By leading the adoption of the new form factor, HP is helping customers reduce costs and simplify change management of their server storage investments."

HP is the leading enterprise hard drive vendor, shipping more than 1 million hard drives per quarter, and it will be the first server and storage vendor to offer the SFF hard drive broadly across a portfolio. The 2.5-inch, 10,000-rpm hard drive is expected to be available in HP ProLiant servers by midyear. The drives are also expected to be used in HP's BladeSystem, Integrity and StorageWorks product lines in 2006. Also in 2006, HP plans to offer 2.5-inch, 15,000-rpm hard drives.

Speed and power were among the attributes that allowed the brash Ali to become one of the legends of boxing. Those are also two characteristics that the new breed of 2.5-inch hard drives brings to servers and storage systems. For administrators seeking enhanced reliability and performance, that is an appealing one-two punch.

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Positive ID

Identity management solutions deliver many benefits, including enhanced security, productivity and cost savings.

Faced with growing numbers of end-users who require access to IT resources, many organizations devote significant time and effort to the task of adding, changing and deleting user information and permissions. In many cases, user identities must be manually updated across disparate applications and resources, leading to data entry mistakes and delays that impact end-user productivity and increase the risk of internal security breaches.

The help desk bears the burden when a user forgets a password or is unable to gain access to a particular resource. IT may also have to manage smart cards, tokens and other authentication devices.

Automated identity management and access control systems can help relieve these problems and improve the integrity of business processes. Such systems are designed to provide a framework for the creation, maintenance and use of digital identities, integrating business processes with the supporting technology needed to effectively manage end-user attributes, credentials and entitlements throughout the enterprise.

Identity management helps companies assure that users — employees, customers, distributors or partners — have secure and seamless access to the applications and other resources that correspond to their profile. Identity management solutions not only aid enterprise security and privacy but also make it easier to assign privileges to large groups of users and to manage those groups more easily. Effective identity management can help companies automate user management and rollout self-service services, potentially saving companies millions of dollars per year in help desk-related costs.

Time Is Money

The ultimate goal of secure identity management is the application of corporate policies onto enterprise systems to ensure that users have appropriate access to the right resources at the right times. But that goal can't be realized without a comprehensive, strategic approach that considers all aspects of the identity infrastructure.

Identity information across an organization must first be integrated — but with respect for authoritative sources of identity. For example, it's not realistic to force HR personnel to stop using their internal applications to maintain employee identity in favor of using a centralized identity repository and its associated interfaces.

A set of proven, advanced management techniques should be applied to the integrated identity to automate, accelerate and simplify identity creation and maintenance. These techniques include role-based administration, workflow, self-service, triggers and others.

The best identity management suites are comprehensive solutions that incorporate a number of elements, including single sign-on, access control, password management, directory services, provisioning and many others. Unlike individual point products that address one or two of these elements, true identity management encompasses the complete identity lifecycle, from creation through propagation, maintenance and termination.

Taken as a whole, identity management can significantly reduce costs and increase productivity. According to Gartner, a 10,000-person enterprise can achieve savings of about \$3.5 million in a three-year period by implementing an automated end-user identity provisioning system, primarily by cutting thousands of hours of IT and help desk time.

Controlling Access

Ultimately, identity management can also improve security by ensuring the confidentiality, integrity and availability of IT resources. A primary goal of identity management is to map corporate policies onto enterprise systems in order to ensure that end-users have appropriate access to the right resources at the right times. Given that employees are responsible for more than 70 percent of unauthorized access to information systems — and more than 95 percent of intrusions that result in significant financial losses — organizations are rightfully concerned about controlling access privileges.

"The need to provide system access to an ever-widening group has brought with it increased risk exposure from both internal and external sources," said Matt Weber, Deloitte & Touche Security Services principal. "Strong identity management can mitigate that risk."

New regulations such as Sarbanes-Oxley and HIPAA are also driving interest in identity management. Sarbanes-Oxley requires that public companies have verifiable access controls surrounding financial applications and data. HIPAA security regulations require that certain healthcare providers, insurers and related organizations establish procedures and mechanisms to protect the confidentiality, integrity and availability of electronic health information.

"The pressure of international regulations mandates a dynamic, integrated approach to identity infrastructure," said Mike Neuenschwander, associate research director for the Burton Group. "Regulatory compliance issues are creating broad changes in enterprise IT architectures."

Comprehensive Approach

The prospect of implementing a secure identity management solution can be an imposing challenge for many enterprise customers. Not only are there significant technological and political considerations but many identity management offerings are limited-purpose, addressing only provisioning or single sign-on, instead of the greater problem. Deploying these "silos" of identity often only makes the situation worse.

"A very common mistake in identity

management deployments is to take a symptomatic approach to the related business problems — addressing, for example, user account provisioning without considering the implications for Web access management," said Chris Stone, Novell vice chairman, Office of the CEO. "This siloed approach often results in yet another largely disconnected identity store."

On the other hand, a comprehensive approach to identity management ultimately makes the entire network infrastructure more secure and easier to manage. Whether contained internally or spreading across the extended supply chain, identity management is becoming a near necessity for organizations with ever-increasing numbers of end-users, applications and information resources. Many are drawn in by the cost savings, but quickly realize the benefits of efficiency, security, flexibility and scalability.

Border Patrol

The latest distributed computing models, including Web services, have created new challenges in terms of identity management. Organizations are now grappling with a new definition of "identity" — one not just contained within internal applications and data. In a supply chain, for example, organizations must figure out how to integrate external user groups into their security policies and controls in order to provide access to appropriate resources.

"As the line between internal and external access dissolves and IT organizations attempt to gain control, focus is shifting to the role of identity in mitigating risk and identity-based compliance," said Steve Gant, founder and CEO, Trusted Network Technologies.

Federated identity management is the latest mechanism for handling this new breed of identity. It focuses on the linking and exchange of identity information between discrete security domains by making identities "portable."

A key role of federated identity management is resolving the incompatibility problems among identity management systems, which have traditionally been proprietary. Companies such

as Microsoft and IBM, as well as industry consortiums and standards bodies such as the Liberty Alliance and OASIS, have put significant effort into developing standards for federated identity.

OASIS recently approved the Security Assertion Markup Language (SAML) version 2.0 as a standard. SAML v2.0 enables the secure exchange of authentication, attribute and authorization information between disparate security domains. Version 2.0 adds key functions to create and manage federated networks that combine and appropriately share repositories of identity information.

"The number of digital identities in today's world is exploding and business partners need better ways to federate and manage those identities in order to control access to their resources in the face of growing regulatory and compliance requirements," noted Rob Philpott of RSA Security, co-chair of the OASIS Security Services Technical Committee. "With the release of SAML v2.0, the industry now has a very robust, proven foundation upon which to build identity-based solutions that meet those requirements."

An Alarming New Clock

Have trouble getting out of bed in the morning? A game of “hide and seek” with the alarm clock ought to be a real eye-opener. Scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Media Lab have created a mobile alarm clock, called “Clocky,” that goes into action once the snooze button is pressed. Clocky, equipped with two small wheels, then rolls off the bedside table and moves to another part of the room.

“When the alarm sounds again, the sleeper must get up out of bed and search for Clocky,” wrote Clocky’s developer, MIT research associate Gauri Nanda. “This ensures that the person is fully awake before turning it off.”

Clocky is enveloped in a shag carpet to prevent damage during its fall. An internal processor calculates a new hiding place each morning. All told, Clocky costs about \$20 to manufacture, Nanda said.

Prospective Students Flunk Ethics

Harvard Business School announced that it is rejecting applications from 119 would-be students who hacked into the school’s admissions Web site to learn if they had been accepted before the school had sent out official notifications.

“This behavior is unethical at best — a serious breach of trust that cannot be countered by rationalization,” Kim Clark, dean of Harvard Business School, said in a statement. “Any applicant found to have done so will not be admitted to this school.”

The prospective students tried to learn their admissions status early using a security flaw in an online college-recruitment and application product called ApplyYourself. A half-dozen business schools were swamped by a wave of electronic intrusions in March after a computer hacker exposed the ApplyYourself security flaw on a BusinessWeek Online message board.

Don’t Touch That Dial

California-based Agile TV says it wants to change the way people watch TV with its voice-controlled remote called “Promptu.” The Promptu remote includes a “talk” button and built-in microphone, together with an infrared receiver used in conjunction with an existing cable box.

The remote control can be told to change channel by name or number, or show program selections by up to 75 pre-defined categories. It can recognize verbs such as “find,” “scan” and “record,” topics such as sports and movies, and the names of movie stars. For example, a subscriber can say “find football” to get a menu of games. Users can say “go to sleep” to turn off the service.

Promptu also recognizes about 15 regional accents and filters out extraneous noise, Agile says.

Aiming for the Brain

Sony has been granted a patent for beaming sensory information directly into the brain — a technique that could one day be used to create video games in which you can smell, taste and touch, or to help people who are blind or deaf.

The U.S. patent, granted to Sony researcher Thomas Dawson, describes a technique for aiming ultrasonic pulses at specific areas of the brain to induce “sensory experiences” such as smells, sounds and images.

“The pulsed ultrasonic signal alters the neural timing in the cortex,” the patent states. “No invasive surgery is needed to assist a person, such as a blind person, to view live and/or recorded images or hear sounds.”

The new technique could be used by Sony, the makers of the PlayStation video game console, to create more realistic and immersive games, although the company said Dawson has not yet conducted experiments with the technology.

Addressing VoIP Security Concerns

Industry alliance focused on reducing the risks of voice/data convergence.

IT security is a major concern for organizations of all sizes, and the growing convergence of voice and data networks only serves to exacerbate and magnify security risks. Successful attacks against a combined voice and data network can cripple an enterprise, halt communications required for productivity, and result in irate customers and lost revenue.

“VoIP has finally arrived, and vulnerabilities in devices and services that enable this technology need to be discovered and mitigated,” said Ron Gula, CTO of Tenable Network Security.

Once voice calls are placed on the data network, they are vulnerable to the same kinds of threats as other network services. With an ordinary telephone, someone has to physically attach a wiretap to a telephone circuit to eavesdrop on a call. In theory, everyone on the Internet already has a potential tap on a VoIP phone. Using a standard software tool, someone could download VoIP packets and play them back.

What if an outsider were able to access the CFO’s voice-message box in the days before the company was to announce earnings to Wall Street analysts? Imagine someone eavesdropping on phone conversations with customers — or worse, forwarding those calls to a competitor.

Theft of services — or “phreaking” — can be accomplished using spoofing and the so-called “man-in-the-middle” attack. Spoofing is manipulating header data in packets to make them appear to be coming from someone other than the sender. In a man-in-the-middle attack, a hacker intercepts traffic from both parties in a VoIP call, and then records and changes data.

Because IP telephony gear is based on servers, VoIP environments are also vulnerable to viruses. That means a regular regimen of updates and patches is required. Many of these servers have Web-based management, which also must be monitored and remedied for bugs and vulnerabilities.

As VoIP deployments become more widespread, the technology becomes a more attractive target for hackers, increasing the potential for harm from cyber attacks. The emergence of VoIP application-level attacks will likely occur as attackers become more familiar with the technology through exposure and easy access.

“Enterprises are rolling out VoIP solu-

tions to reduce costs and increase operating efficiencies, but this also introduces new security risks that could negate those savings and demand increased resources if not managed properly,” said Martin Roesch, creator of Snort and founder and CTO of Sourcefire.

Unfortunately, few organizations implementing VoIP solutions have an adequate understanding of the security issues involved. More attention has been focused on issues such as voice quality, latency and interoperability — fundamental quality-of-service considerations that companies must resolve before they can even begin to justify the move to VoIP. However, security is equally important, and key to the continued success of the technology.

“VoIP is starting to gain momentum in the market, but proactively addressing security concerns will help drive wide-

“VoIP is starting to gain momentum in the market, but proactively addressing security concerns will help drive widespread adoption.”

spread adoption,” said Gerhard Eschelbeck, VP of Engineering and CTO of Qualys.

To address these concerns, leading VoIP vendors, providers, security researchers and thought leaders launched the industry’s first VoIP Security Alliance (VOIPSA) to discover and reduce VoIP security risks. The VOIPSA aims to help organizations understand and avoid VoIP security risks through discussion lists, white papers, sponsorship of VoIP security research projects, and the development of tools and methodologies for public use. VOIPSA is the first and only group dedicated to VoIP security backed by a wide spectrum of organizations represented by universities, security researchers, VoIP vendors and VoIP providers.

“Once the decision is made to put VoIP at the heart of their business, companies need to address security holistically — at the applications, systems and services layers,” said Joseph Curcio, vice president of security technology development at Avaya. “Avaya believes the VoIP Security Alliance will enable businesses to experience the benefits of IP, while ensuring network security and preserving business continuity.”

On the Offensive

Penetration testing ensures strong security by attempting to breach it.

Most organizations understand the importance of IT security, and have taken measures to protect their systems from attack. However, it's not enough to establish policies, install security tools and patch systems when new vulnerabilities are exposed. It's important to test those security measures to see if they're truly doing their jobs.

After all, network administrators are human; even a slight configuration error or one easy-to-crack password could leave the network vulnerable to attack. What's more, the security landscape and the network itself are constantly changing, and security measures can become obsolete pretty quickly.

Unfortunately, many organizations only find the holes in their defenses after a hacker has exploited them. One way to ensure that the network is hacker-proof is to look at it through a hacker's eyes. This process is known as network penetration testing.

Best Defense

Penetration testing is a method of scanning the network for security weaknesses that leave it vulnerable to attack. Like a night watchman checking locked

doors on his rounds, penetration testing is an active process that helps ensure security measures adequately protect the network.

With penetration testing, an organization safely mimics real-world attacks by running exploits against the network. Penetration testers often use some of the same tools hackers use to gain unauthorized access, systematically working through all the systems and devices on the network.

This process enables the network administrator to accurately evaluate the effectiveness of intrusion detection systems and other security technologies and prioritize any remediation efforts that may be needed. It also helps the organization meet regulatory compliance requirements and maximize the value of every dollar spent on security measures.

Offensive Strategy

A hacker generally begins his attack with basic reconnaissance, and penetration testing takes the same approach. The test team gathers information about the environment, including operating systems, applications and their patch levels, then scans the network looking for open ports and available services.

Before testing begins, however, the

organization must decide whether to attempt the test internally or outsource it to a third party. Many experts say that so-called "black box" penetration tests — in which the test team knows nothing about the network — are better than "white box" tests. After all, hackers know nothing about the network when they attempt to break in. This is one key advantage of outsourcing penetration testing to a third party.

ardous to the health of production networks; novice testers have been known to crash vital systems.

This is another reason for outsourcing penetration testing to an experienced third party. Organizations wanting to perform penetration testing frequently should ensure that internal staff is thoroughly trained.

Automated penetration testing tools are available that take the guesswork out

"Penetration testing is one of the best and most comprehensive methods of precisely determining the risk to network information assets. One of the barriers to widespread adoption of penetration testing has been the lack of trained people and professional, simple-to-use and affordable products."

However, white box tests have their place. An employee with a grudge would have knowledge of the network and use that knowledge to advantage, and a hacker has the benefit of time to find vulnerabilities. White box testing can uncover serious weaknesses, generally at a lower cost than black box testing.

of the process and reduce the cost and risk. However, some experts contend that these tools are always somewhat out of date because dozens of new vulnerabilities are discovered each week.

"Penetration testing is one of the best and most comprehensive methods of precisely determining the risk to network information assets," said Matthew Kovar, Director of Security Solutions Services at the Yankee Group. "One of the barriers to widespread adoption of penetration testing has been the lack of trained people and professional, simple-to-use and affordable products."

Choose Your Weapons

The next phase is vulnerability testing. Using readily available tools — several of which are freeware — the test team scans systems looking for specific vulnerabilities to exploit, such as operating system bugs and security holes, weaknesses in firewalls and routers, insecure Web services, etc. The team may also use tools such as war dialer, which dials numbers within the organization's exchange looking for modems, and password cracker, which makes brute force attempts at cracking password files.

Whatever tools are used, experts recommend that organizations try them out on a test environment before unleashing them on the production network. It's also important to scan any downloaded hacking software for viruses and other malicious code.

Although all systems should ideally be included in the penetration test, certain systems may have to be placed off limits. For example, the risk of potential financial losses associated with the downtime of a transaction server may be greater than the security risks associated with that server.

Use Caution

Because penetration testing simulates real hacker techniques, it can be haz-

Final Analysis

The result of penetration testing is a report that outlines precisely where a network could be penetrated, the risks associated with such a security breach and what corrective action should be taken. Reports should be thorough, but not consist of hundreds of pages of mind-numbing jargon. The key is to provide upper management with clear information to facilitate the decision-making process, and IT personnel with enough detail to handle any needed remediation.

Penetration testing can be expensive if outsourced to a third party. Many organizations prefer to avoid this cost, assuming their systems are secure. However, it generally only takes one penetration test to prove how truly vulnerable sensitive systems and data are.

It is far better to find those vulnerabilities before a hacker does. Penetration testing proves that the best defense is a good offense, and provides the peace of mind that someone attempted to hack into the network — and failed.

How to Hire a Hacker

Penetration testing requires extensive, up-to-the-minute knowledge of network vulnerabilities and hacker tools and techniques — as well as the ability to test the limits of security measures without causing serious damage to production systems. Few in-house IT departments possess such skills or the time to complete regular penetration tests.

As a result, most organizations outsource penetration testing to third-party providers. Outsourcing comes with a different set of risks than internal testing, but it is certainly not risk free. IT managers should thoroughly evaluate third-party providers before outsourcing.

First, look for providers with adequate credentials, client references and liability insurance. Ideally, the provider will have completed similar projects for organizations with similar needs. Ask to see examples of the types of reports generated after the test. Also ask what steps the provider takes to secure test results and other sensitive information.

In the interview process, ensure

that the provider can adequately answer technical questions. Also take note of what questions the provider asks. For example, the provider should ask to see the organization's security policy and also ask in-depth questions regarding the organization's tolerance of risk versus cost.

Once the test team arrives, ensure that it includes only highly trained and experienced personnel and not unskilled engineers. One way to test the skills of the test team is to set up a fake vulnerability, known as a "honey pot," and see if the team finds it fairly early in the test.

The test team should not demand that the organization's employees stay out of the way. On the contrary, penetration testing requires the active involvement of the organization's IT staff to reduce risk. An in-house staff member should be advised of the testing process and be allowed to monitor the test and answer any questions or concerns. After the test, IT staff should check for any back doors left open or unauthorized login attempts.

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IT Must Drive Innovation

Business success depends on IT's ability to contribute real business value.

Companies have shifted their focus to growth creation, and information technology can contribute significant value.

However, many IT organizations continue to emphasize maintenance of day-to-day operations and cost reduction, forced to spend so much time "putting out fires" that they don't have enough time to develop innovative business solutions.

Global management consulting firm A.T. Kearney predicts many companies' growth opportunities are at risk because their IT organizations cannot respond effectively to the demands of their business. According to the firm's study of 200 North American and European business executives, 67 percent of respondents view IT innovation as important or critical to their companies' success.

However, the study found only 20 percent of companies' IT investment is allocated to IT innovation — a 30 percent decrease from a similar study conducted in 2002. According to the most recent survey, 72 percent of executives say the best technology ideas in their companies originate outside of the IT department in areas such as corporate strategy, sales, marketing and operations. In fact, 47 percent of business leaders surveyed agree that their IT department focuses primarily on tactical, day-to-day IT requirements rather than longer-term strategic requirements.

"These findings shatter the notion that IT leads the early adoption of technology and the business side slows down the process," said Mark Livingston, a vice president at A.T. Kearney. "The reality is most IT departments can't effectively explore innovative uses of technology because they are stuck in the daily operational grind. Business leaders accept this and look outside of IT for innovative technology resources to achieve strategic business goals."

The study found that strategic alignment between companies and their IT departments has moved in the wrong direction. Just 25 percent of respondents said their IT and business planning processes are fully integrated and developed simultaneously. In the 2002 study, 32 percent of participants had a fully integrated IT planning process.

As a result, many perceive IT organizations as unresponsive and not very agile. Only 41 percent of business executives believe their IT organizations react

well to business change. And, more than 30 percent of executives believe 20 percent or more of their company's IT budget is wasted each year.

"IT organizations are increasingly challenged to move beyond maintaining and fixing the complex IT architectures of the past and to begin producing true value beyond cost-cutting," said Dan Starta, A.T. Kearney vice president and co-leader of the study. "The most effective way to achieve value is via well-integrated IT-business partnerships, not an environment where IT is viewed as a tactical function. To be successful, IT organizations must start judging their success in

A study by A.T. Kearney shows that of 200 respondents, 67 percent view IT innovation as important or critical to their companies' success.

terms of value contribution to core business operations and innovative initiatives that support business strategy and drive growth."

IT organizations will have to get past several roadblocks before they are able to achieve that goal, according to the A.T. Kearney report. The evolutionary nature of today's IT infrastructure has created a complex environment with poor integration among applications and data. IT organizations are scarcely able to keep up with the rapid pace of business change, much less lead innovation.

Business and IT executives also have very different views of what IT can do to spur innovation. Business executives have become more aggressive regarding the adoption of new technologies. More than half of business leaders surveyed believed their organizations should adopt technology early, compared with about one-third of IT leaders.

This is not to suggest that organizations should grasp every new technology that reaches the marketplace. IT leaders can help guide their organizations toward the future by reducing complexity, maximizing utilization of existing resources, and focusing on innovative new ways to serve customers and meet business goals.

MIMO Speeds Up WLANs

Multiple input, multiple output technology boosts wireless LAN throughput to at least 100Mbps.

In the alphabet soup of wireless networking standards, 802.11n is the latest proposed entry. The IEEE 802.11 Working Group for Wireless LANs is reviewing proposals for a new version of the 802.11 standard that would increase WLAN throughput to at least 100Mbps. Current WLANs based upon the commonly used 802.11a/b/g standards have throughput in the 18Mbps to 22Mbps range.

That substantial boost in speed comes thanks to a technology called MIMO — short for multiple input, multiple output. MIMO uses multiple antennas to transmit and receive data in the unlicensed 20MHz to 40MHz frequencies. By using four transmit and four receive antennas, for example, MIMO can quadruple the raw data speeds.

Of course, 802.11a/b/g WLANs have raw data throughput rates of up to 54Mbps, although the actual throughputs are less than half that. Proposed 802.11n standards also improve the efficiency of media access control so that the actual

throughput is closer to the raw throughput.

In addition to transmitting data as much as six times faster than existing WLAN technologies, 802.11n promises to deliver eight times the coverage, enabling very high-speed connections over distances of 300 feet or more. As a result, 802.11n provides the bandwidth and quality of service needed to run advanced applications, such as streaming video and voice over IP (VoIP).

The addition of an 802.11n device can improve the performance of existing 802.11a/b/g networks because it does not drop to the lowest common networking speed in mixed-mode environments. It also resists interference from neighboring Wi-Fi systems and 2.4GHz devices.

In January, the IEEE 802.11n Task Group tossed out all but two 802.11n proposals. The standards body is considering TgnSync, which is supported by vendors Atheros, Cisco, Intel, Nokia and Qualcomm, and WWiSE, which is supported by Airgo, Broadcom, STI and Texas Instruments. A proposal has to win a 75 percent majority of votes in order to

become a standard.

Although a final standard is not expected until November 2006, a number of companies have already introduced “pre n” equipment. Airgo owns the patent to the term MIMO and insists that “true” MIMO not only uses multiple antennas and radios but also performs spatial multiplexing.

Products based upon Airgo’s chipset transmit and receive multiple distinct data streams within the same frequency to double or triple throughput.

Rival vendors are applying the MIMO name to any WLAN product that uses multiple antennas and radios to increase throughput, even if they send only one data stream.

However, these proprietary pre n products don’t always interoperate with each other, and won’t be compatible with the final standard. That concerns many experts, who say the success of the WLAN industry depends upon strict adherence to standards.

“Vendors took advantage of unsuspecting buyers when they touted pre-stan-

dard technology for 802.11g that later did not meet the standard,” said Gartner analyst Ken Dulaney. “Left unchecked, the industry is unfortunately poised to repeat itself with 802.11n.”

The Wi-Fi Alliance announced that it will not certify data rate enhancement features based on 802.11n until a standard is ratified. The group said it will revoke the Wi-Fi certification of any product that claims 802.11n capabilities if that product is proven to adversely impact the interoperability of other Wi-Fi-certified products.

“Pre-standard products always present an inherent risk for technology adopters, and that is why we will not certify 802.11n products until the IEEE standard is finalized,” said Wi-Fi Alliance Managing Director Frank Hanzlik.

Enterprises would probably be wise to wait for the standard before deploying 802.11n devices. However, pre n products are ideal for consumers and small businesses that need a robust WLAN and don’t have to worry about interoperability.

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More than Voice

VoIP growth hinges on improvement of standards such as SIP.

Simplified network infrastructure, lower operating costs, improved productivity and increased flexibility are among the well-established benefits of using voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). Yet, many of this technology's key benefits have not yet been completely realized due to a lack of interoperability.

The percentage of companies using VoIP grew from 3 percent in 2003 to 12 percent in 2004, according to a recent study by the technology analyst firm In-Stat/MDR. However, the report noted that even those companies making the switch still tend to rely on a mix of voice technologies rather than depending solely on VoIP.

Most industry analysts agree that the key to continued VoIP adoption is the development of standards that will ensure end-to-end interoperability. Once that happens, organizations will be able to utilize a broader range of functions, including unified communications, video, instant messaging and presence-based applications.

"Improved standards will broaden

worldwide VoIP adoption and accelerate the growth of VoIP products and services," said Howard Bubbs, vice president and general manager of Intel's Communications Infrastructure Group.

SIP the Key?

Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) is perhaps the key standard for VoIP's future. SIP is being incorporated into a growing number of voice systems from vendors nationwide. Experts say it could be the protocol that unifies a vast array of enterprise applications in coming years, although it does not enable complete interoperability among today's products.

SIP is a signaling-type protocol that enables different types of devices such as computers, handheld gadgets and telephones to "talk" with each other seamlessly in an IP network. Because SIP is an Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) protocol, it is inherently an open architecture, which is a big reason most major communications equipment manufacturers and software companies are embracing it.

Although SIP is used to enable IP telephony, it is not merely a software-based telephony switch — it is capable of much more than that. SIP treats voice as just another medium, albeit a very important one. It can also be used to send files such as video images between two points, opening the door for a variety of multimedia applications. It is quickly becoming the backbone protocol for numerous per-

"Improved standards will broaden worldwide VoIP adoption and accelerate the growth of VoIP products and services."

sonal and enterprise communications such as rich-media conferencing, push-to-talk and location-based services.

Seeking Consistency

SIP's main advantages are its extensibility and flexibility for adding new features. Because it is a text-based protocol, developers find it easy to develop and debug applications, leading to lower product costs for equipment providers.

Ironically, however, the high degree of flexibility offered by SIP has also been one of its chief shortcomings. Because SIP can be extended so easily in so many different ways, vendors often take varied approaches to its baseline features. As a result of this inconsistency, organizations installing mixed VoIP environments sometimes experience interoperability problems.

Another issue is the fact that the market simply moves faster than standards bodies. SIP is still a work in progress, with the IETF continually working on clarifications, bug fixes, tweaks and extensions. When vendors want to add complex features to SIP, they are typically working ahead of the IETF and then must try to work with the standards body get those features incorporated into the standard after the fact.

More extensions naturally add complexity to the SIP protocol. At present, there are more than 120 active SIP-related draft proposals under consideration by the IETF. Complexity and interoperability are among the major concerns of the International SIP Forum, which sponsors regular SIP interoperability testing ("SIPit") events.

SIPits are weeklong events that enable companies with SIP implementations to come together and ensure their

different implementations are compatible. Challenges addressed at a recent SIPit event involved ironing out interoperability issues with the use of multimedia audio, video and instant messaging within SIP sessions.

A recent SIP extension was developed specifically to address instant messaging and presence-based services. Today, these services are based on proprietary technology, with no technical standard to support interoperability between different service providers. Parallels can be drawn between today's stand-alone IM systems and the early days of e-mail, when the lack of standards prevented users on different online systems from exchanging messages. The SIP add-on — SIP for Instant Messaging and Presence Leveraging Extensions (SIMPLE) — has emerged as the leading method of standardizing instant messaging and presence among various service providers. SIMPLE is backed by Microsoft, IBM, Sun, Novell and other industry leaders.

Moving Toward IMS

According to technology research firm Venture Development Corp. (VDC), SIP is driving a movement toward a new type of communication infrastructure it calls IP multimedia subsystems (IMS). The company says IMS will benefit both users and service providers. It will give consumers a common experience across different user devices. Carriers will use IMS to converge their network infrastructure in order to reduce overall equipment costs and to rapidly deploy new applications across multiple access platforms such as broadband cable, DSL, 3G and Wi-Fi.

VDC says the move to IMS will drive significant short-term SIP growth, with initial trials through 2006 and more significant deployments in 2007. VDC estimates that worldwide markets for SIP infrastructure and software will exceed \$5.5 billion by 2007, representing a compound annual growth rate of 36.1 percent between 2003 and 2007.

"The acceptance of IMS by both wireline and wireless carriers solidifies SIP's role as the protocol of choice for all network operators," said Chad Hard, VDC's telecom/datacom practice director. "Most carrier-focused vendors will repackage their existing SIP offerings to cater to this rapidly emerging market."

"SIP has become the de facto standard for real-time communications over IP networks. SIP is rapidly replacing other VoIP protocols as the protocol of choice for a variety of voice, video, media and other applications in both enterprise and carrier networks."

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Offshoring Trend Continues

U.S. businesses will continue to outsource work overseas as they do not have the internal resources to do the job themselves, analysts believe, adding that while there could be some hiccups, the trend will continue undeterred.

While less than 5 percent of IT jobs in the U.S. and other developed countries are currently sent offshore, that number will rise to 30 percent by 2015, according to a recent report by Gartner.

Worldwide spending on offshore research and development and engineering will increase by a whopping 860 percent, from \$1.25 billion in 2004 to as much as \$12 billion in 2010, Gartner predicts. Offshore spending on infrastructure outsourcing will grow from between \$100 million and \$250 million to between \$3 billion and \$4 billion over the same period. Offshore spending on application-development services will more than double from \$23 billion to as much as \$50 billion.

More Spam, Less Concern

More than a year after the CAN-SPAM Act became law, e-mail users say they are receiving slightly more spam in their inboxes than before but they apparently are less annoyed by it than they used to be, according to a new survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Fifty-three percent of adult e-mail users in the U.S. say they trust e-mail less because of spam, down from 62 percent a year ago. Pew also found that 22 percent of e-mail users say they are spending less time on e-mail because of spam, down from 29 percent last year.

"We see a little more spam with a little less distress since Congress tried to stem the flow of unsolicited e-mail with the CAN-SPAM Act in January 2004," said Deborah Fallows, senior research fellow at the Pew Internet Project. "Maybe people are getting used to spam, or becoming resigned to it, just like air pollution and crowded roads."

More Prefer Online News

The number of online adults who prefer the Internet as their main source of news has grown more than 35 percent in the last four years, at the expense of television and newspapers, according to a recent report by JupiterResearch.

Young adults, ages 18 to 24, are helping drive the preference trend, especially in national news. Thirty-three percent of online young adults say they prefer the Internet as their primary source of news, while 40 percent prefer TV and 10 percent newspapers. Preference for online local news is growing, but hasn't exceeded 10 percent among online adults.

"While traditional media companies like The New York Times and CNN are doing very well online, our analysis shows that brands like AOL and Yahoo! are increasingly important for online audiences," said David Card, VP and senior analyst for JupiterResearch.

'Pharming' Scams Newest Threat

A new form of online fraud called "pharming" is on the rise, according to the SANS Institute's quarterly review of Internet threats. Analysts say pharming — the redirecting of Internet users to Web pages without their knowledge — could be used to obtain banking or other financial-services information.

A variation on phishing, pharming takes advantage of vulnerabilities in Web browsers to redirect users to fake web sites, even when they type the correct Internet address into their browsers. Unlike phishing, pharming does not rely on the victim taking an action, such as clicking on a link in a bogus e-mail, to trigger an attack.

Recent pharming attacks have taken advantage of old and insecure implementations of BIND (Berkeley Internet Name Domain) technology, the dominant DNS software used on the Internet, and vulnerable default configurations on some versions of Windows 2000 systems that were acting as DNS servers, according to the SANS Institute's Internet Storm Center.

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