

RIM Acquires Ascendent Systems to Link With PBXs

Bern Elliot, Ken Dulaney, Phillip Redman

Ascendent's software will enable Research in Motion's (RIM's) BlackBerry to connect with private branch exchanges (PBXs) and work like a business phone. This could enable its entry into the mobile unified communications market.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Event

On 10 March 2006, RIM announced that it has acquired Ascendent, which is a member of the BlackBerry ISV Alliance Program. Ascendent offers a standards-based software solution that augments current PBX and Internet Protocol Private Branch Exchange (IP-PBX) systems. The solution supports heterogeneous telephony environments to "push" voice calls and extend corporate desk phone functionality to mobile users on their wireless handsets or wireline phones. Ascendent will become a wholly owned subsidiary of RIM. Terms of the agreement were not disclosed.

Analysis

The next generation of wireless handheld devices targeted at enterprises will be a combination of PDA and phone, providing voice and data in a unified communications environment. RIM's BlackBerry devices have included phone and PDA capabilities for the past several years. In addition, Nokia has stated that it intends to equip all of its E series devices with e-mail and a link to the PBX system of the user's choice, and Motorola is likely to follow suit.

By buying Ascendent, RIM has made a strategic purchase in the unified communications market. RIM's server component lacked a voice option of its own, requiring the vendor to partner with other companies to provide it. Ascendent offers mobility and continuity applications for voice communications. Through Ascendent's unified communications framework, enterprise customers can leverage existing voice infrastructures (PBX and voice mail) while integrating with cellular, remote/home-office, voice-over-IP and Wi-Fi devices.

Since RIM has brought this technology in-house, instead of trying to persuade each PBX vendor to create a "softphone" and interfaces for its product, its solution offers the potential competitive advantage of a consistent interface, regardless of the PBX link. RIM's acquisition clarifies the segments that will battle for control of unified communications — which include handset vendors, such as Nokia and RIM, PBX vendors like Avaya and Cisco Systems, and mainstream software vendors like Microsoft.

Recommendations

- **Enterprises:** Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of shifting to a more unified approach, and of moving away from a "multiple-silo" communications architecture with separate e-mail, PBX, mobile-phone, instant-messaging and "presence" technologies. The ability to integrate mobility broadly across all enterprise communications will be an important part of this plan. Gartner believes that by 2007, a company's capability to leverage and integrate communications into key business processes and workflows will be a critical differentiator (0.8 probability).
- **Vendors:** Define a vision and solution that allows flexibility and choice in enterprise communications. Stand-alone solutions will be less effective than those that are unified. During 2006, vendors must decide whether they will add these capabilities through partnerships or further develop their current solutions.

Analytical Sources: Bern Elliot, Ken Dulaney and Philip Redman, Gartner Research

Recommended Reading and Related Research

- "RIM/NTP Settlement Means BlackBerry Deployments Can Continue" — Now that RIM and NTP have settled their patent dispute, enterprises can continue their U.S. deployments without fear of a BlackBerry shutdown. **By Martin Reynolds, Monica Basso and Ken Dulaney**
- "Microsoft Finally Wakes Up to Unified Communications" — By merging its messaging and real-time communications units, Microsoft is positioning itself to exploit the convergence of diverse communication modalities. **By Matthew Cain and Bern Elliot**

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