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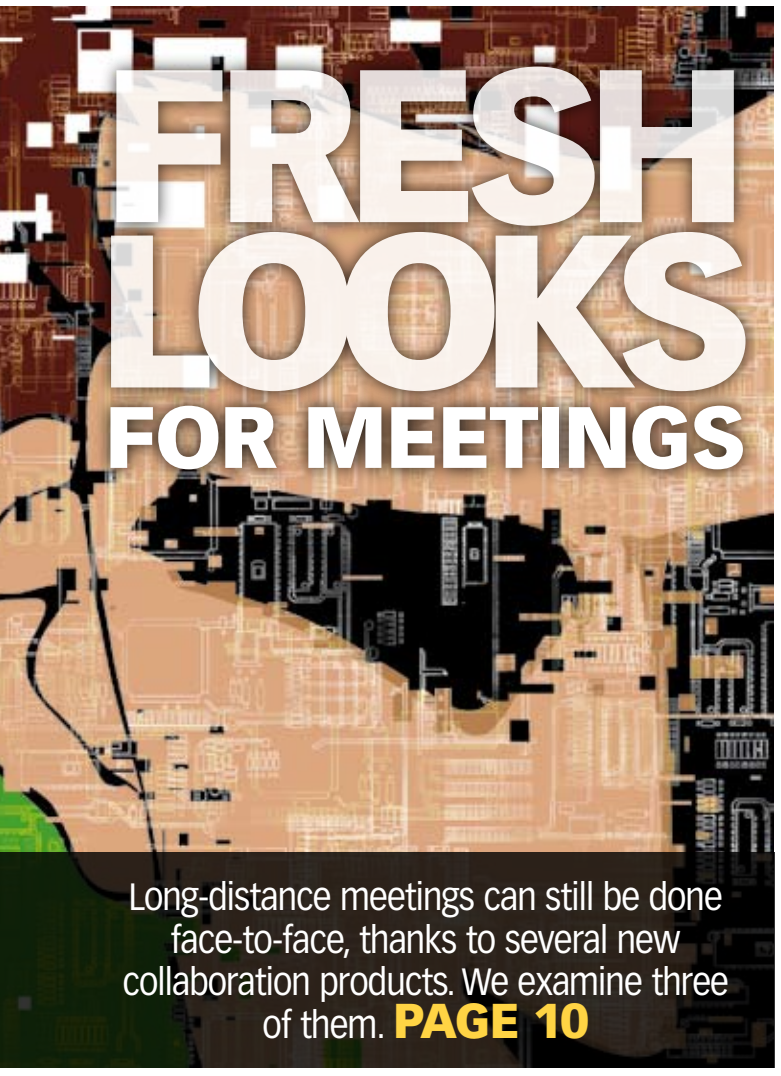

Long-distance meetings can still be done face-to-face, thanks to several new collaboration products. We examine three of them. **PAGE 10**

Questions linger over wi-fi payments in Singapore

BY VICTORIA HO

After the recent trial of wireless payment terminals for shopkeepers, a few questions have surfaced regarding how robust and secure such a system is for handling cash transactions.

The recent trial with Nets (Network for Electronic Transfers) has shown new business possibilities for Singapore's Wireless@SG network. Although commercial availability of the wireless ATM (automated teller machine) payment service has been scheduled as early as the third quarter this year, some network accountability and reliability issues have come to light.

For one, users have no control over the network security and availability that is crucial to operations.

In an interview, Chris Witeck, product marketing director at US-based VPN (virtual private network) vendor Aventail, said it is precisely because of the lack of control that large enterprises are reluctant to use a public network. "Users have limited control over security protocols. They also have limited guarantees about bandwidth availability and uptime," he said.

Trial users of Nets over Wireless@SG alluded to such limits.

NO GUARANTEES

Daniel Wong, group general manager of local retailer Bee Cheng Hiang, reportedly said: "So far, it's good—as long as the signal is strong."

What happens when the signal isn't strong? Although the wireless Nets system purports

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Oracle deal could hurt Hyperion users

BY HEATHER HAVENSTEIN, EPHRAIM SCHWARTZ AND IRENE THAM

Oracle's US$3.3 billion (S$5 billion) purchase of business intelligence (BI) vendor Hyperion Solutions announced early March will likely benefit the former, but Hyperion users could find cutbacks in product upgrades, less negotiating power and increased maintenance fees, said users and analysts.

Bart Klein, vice-president and manager of application development at US-based UMB Financial noted that Hyperion is the latest of the best-of-breed vendors used by the bank to be snapped up by Oracle. The bank, he said, also uses Siebel CRM software, Stellent content management tools and Versatility call centre products, which have all been acquired by Oracle.

"What is next?" Klein said. "While not our intention to put all of our technology investments in the hands of a single vendor, the consolidation of the industry has led to precisely that. I am very concerned that businesses will lose leverage as a result of this continued consolidation of major technology solutions."

Similarly, David Dowling, Hyperion Financial Management administrator at Flint Group, a US-based supplier of printing inks, plates and pigments, aired concerns about service. "As Hyperion has grown as a company, their customer service and support has declined," he said. "I think this will be a step in the same direction."

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Google Apps finding a niche in Singapore

BY VICTORIA HO

Following the Singapore launch of Google's enterprise web application service in November last year, it stands poised to win users in niche areas, despite the ubiquity of traditional software.

Smaller firms in Singapore with constrained budgets and those with no habits formed by using traditional applications will find Google Apps most appealing.

Ravi Shekhar Pandey, senior market analyst, Springboard Research

Springboard Research senior market analyst, Ravi Shekhar Pandey, sees take-up spread across three groups of users in the foreseeable future.

"SMBs (small- and medium-sized businesses) in Asia not already using Microsoft Office would want to give this a shot, because they now have an alternative," he said. "Those already using MS Office may wish to incorporate Google Apps for specific tasks which require Google's sharing capabilities for lighter use."

Giving Springboard's own example, he said while the analysts will stick to Excel for its robust features, its sales team uses Google Spreadsheets for "collaborative marketing efforts across offices where we don't have to crunch a lot of numbers."

As for large businesses, he sees adoption only from the individual "not any corporate strategies," in effect.

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BRIEFS

SCS DELIVERS STAGE ONE OF VIRGIN ISLANDS SYSTEM
Singapore Computer Systems, an ICT service provider, has delivered the first phase of iBizFile, an internet-based business system to the British Virgin Islands' Financial Services Commission.

iBizFile is a customised business registration and electronic document submission and filing system. It allows business forms and their supporting documents to be filed with the FSC for registration and statutory disclosure.

SINGAPORE FIRM TO SELL US SECURITY SOLUTIONS
Quantiq International, a Singapore-based provider of network security solutions, has been appointed by PatchLink of the US to sell its patch and vulnerability management software.

As part of a recently-signed partnership deal, Quantiq will distribute PatchLink's security solutions—which protect computer networks—in Singapore and Indonesia.

Lim Keng Hoe, Quantiq's regional director of corporate strategy and business development, said the company will continue to improve the product and expand its market share too.

NCS SETS UP SECURITY CENTRE, MANAGES GOVT WEBSITE
NCS Group, a Singapore-based IT and communications engineering services company, has set up a security business centre and will operate a government website.

The centre will be supported by its recent collaboration with US enterprise security management firm ArcSight. NCS established the Asia-Pacific centre in Singapore to monitor and interpret security threats to business networks such as hackers and malicious insiders. The centre uses ArcSight's enterprise security management tools.

Also, NCS has been appointed by the Singapore government to operate MyeCitizen, a website that provides online government services to more than 64,000 subscribers.

NCS will provide private-sector services and content to complement the online government services currently on the website.

The government's move to turn over the website's operations to a private-sector company is part of the iGov2010 plan to enhance e-services to the public.

F5 NETWORKS OPENS SINGAPORE TECHNOLOGY CENTRE
F5 Networks, a US provider of software solutions, recently set up a technology centre in Singapore.

The centre will support F5's customers and partners in Southeast Asia and South Asia, and may be extended to its customers in the wider Asia-Pacific.

Also, the centre will help businesses maximise the returns on their applications and network infrastructure.

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Google Apps

This might lead to an eventual transition, however. Citing Salesforce's example of how it was first picked up by a work group, eventually catching on in popularity, Shekhar sees this as a possible way Google might find its foothold through corporate doors.

Ravi thinks that "Google is still pretty far away from replacing desktop applications," seeing its web applications as a complement to existing systems, if not just a cheaper alternative.

"From an Asian perspective, I think you will see two waves—new user adoption could be higher as many countries are still computerising and Google offers a practically zero-cost alternative, but existing users will probably be slower as they prefer the existing security and features, and they won't have to deal with bandwidth issues," he said.

Globally, some 100,000 companies have signed on for its paid, premium service. Although Google seems far away, its offering may be just what smaller Asian companies need.

Steve Hodgkinson, research director, Ovum

Google Apps Premier Edition builds on the previously released, free web application service hosted on the customer's domain, and comes bundled with document and spreadsheet editors, in addition to its immensely popular email client and calendar.

The Premier Edition offers 10GB of storage per user and a 99 per cent uptime (for GMail, not the others) guarantee, for US$50 (S$76) a year.

While Google's advantages lie in its familiarity and brand name, it isn't robust or secure enough to support a large organisation's needs. However, smaller cash-strapped companies might find it a boon, and just enough for their needs, wrapped in a very affordable package.

THE PRICE IS RIGHT

Tiong Ting Ming, IT advisor at SMJK (Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan), which controls 78 schools in Malaysia, faced a number of obstacles to upgrading its schools' IT infrastructure. The students wanted a way to share documents, have personal school email accounts and be connected to the school system for homework updates.

But funding was the biggest obstacle. Since the school group's IT relied on the charity of external parties and organisations, it was not about to upgrade its entire hardware architecture. In fact, Microsoft licences for its Office suite were beginning to be a problem, and the school turned to its open-source counterpart, Open Office, instead.

However, Open Office required computing power they couldn't spare. SMJK's computers, mostly Pentium IIIs, were unable to handle the software, either crashing or behaving very sluggishly.

So Tiong turned to Google Apps Educational Edition, a free version giving them 2GB of storage per user and a pledge from Google to supply 200,000 email accounts, after they wrote to Google with a plea.

Tiong estimates these accounts will last the organisation approximately five years. More importantly, he estimates this set-up will cost a mere eighth of an otherwise large expenditure of around US$3 million-US$4 million with a traditional desktop software set-up.

When interviewed, he didn't seem to think that latency issues were of significant concern.

However, his organisation does not require quick response time from its applications. Since the majority of users will be students, who are used to the free GMail, this is likely to be easily accepted.

"In the past, you would have felt something amiss if you didn't store your document on a physical diskette. But these days, in a networked environment, we are much more accustomed to saving something 'invisibly' on a network drive," he said.

"What's the difference between saving it on a network drive and saving it 'somewhere' on a server? Students don't feel it odd; it is just a change in mindset," he said.

Ovum's principal analyst, David Bradshaw agrees. He said the "lingering fear that somehow your data isn't secure if it isn't on your systems in your building," is fast growing outdated. He thinks the security one feels with having physical storage is merely artificial since data can still be stolen regardless of where they are stored.

A BIG USER EXPERIENCE SHIFT

It will take time, however, not just to change mindsets about latency and storage issues, but also that of working exclusively on a web application.

Hong Kong-based Sanden Electronic Equipment went through a few teething problems of the same nature when it first started out. Thomas Fung, its engineering manager, recommended a gradual approach to getting the organisation to turn around.

GMail was more popular, compared with the other applications, which were slow on the take-up. Calendar was next, because it was more integrated with GMail's interface, and only after sometime did the staff use Docs, spreadsheets and the start page.

"I expect it takes time to change people's habit from using desktop software to online software," he said.

Steve Hodgkinson, research director also at Ovum, regards user willingness to move as an evolution issue, saying that Google's offerings are "designed for a new generation of users who are growing up with always-on broadband and will be comfortable with web applications."

Nonetheless, he is waiting for Google to step up its game and "evolve over time to plug gaps like presentation software". He sees that the movement over to web applications might take the form of a "phased transition rather than a wholesale dumping of desktop software." Big processor loads such as graphic manipulation and games will remain a mainstay of desktop software, he said.

"BEST EFFORT" WON'T CUT IT

Although Google offers 99 per cent uptime on GMail for its Premier Edition, that's exactly what it is—only GMail. The other applications don't enjoy the same assurance. When you have problems accessing company documents with no written clause to assure uptime in that respect, this won't be accessible to the medium- and upward-sized business.

In an interview, Kevin Gough, product manager at Google, explained that the company uses its own products to power its enterprise.

"Google already handles billions of dollars of financial transactions. Google itself is a large publicly-traded company and under strong financial scrutiny. We are on the same systems as our customers, the same exact standards and versions," he said. CW

Premier web service suite grows up

Launched globally in October, Google Apps Premier Edition is Google's paid web service suite. It rides on its previous launch of Google Apps for Your Domain, which is a suite of web applications that is hosted on Google servers, but accessed through the customer's domain name.

The service goes for US$50 (S$76) per user account and provides 10GB of storage with that, compared to the 2GB that the free accounts provide. Users also get APIs (application programming interfaces) to integrate this with existing infrastructure such as having single sign-on, user management and email gateways. Round-the-clock phone support is assured, as well.

The suite of services will include, in addition to the popular GMail and Calendar, a document and spreadsheet processor, compatible with the BlackBerry version of GMail's mobile web application.

Other versions of Google Apps which come free are Google Apps for Education and another edition for families and small groups.