

The Big Picture: In Focus

The following is excerpted from the March 2004 issue of Release 1.0.

Convoq: We know when you're there!

BY CHRISTINA KOUKKOS

The inspiration for Convoq came from – of all things – the release of Windows XP in October 2001. Co-founder and CEO Chuck Digate says he was “hit between the eyes” when he read that Windows Messenger had been integrated into XP. “I realized it would be a big deal in the office place, not just in seats of IM but in terms of applications built on top of a real-time communication platform.”

Underlying this inspiration, presumably, was Digate's long history in messaging and collaboration: After spending four years with Lotus, he left in 1989 to found Beyond Incorporated, developers of BeyondMail. He sold it to Banyan Systems in 1994. Convoq CTO Chris Herot, also a Lotus alumnus, has spent 20 years working on video conferencing and other multimedia communication initiatives. Herot left Lotus in 1999 to start MessageMachines, a developer of wired and wireless message-routing software. He hooked up with Digate in the spring of 2002.

Digate and Herot saw a number of elements converging to encourage multimedia collaboration online: ubiquitous IM networks, more pervasive broadband, faster processors, cheaper cameras, and the fact that Flash, which supports fast and lightweight audio-visual functionality, is installed on 97 percent of all computers.

Where the Flash-based Convoq software, called ASAP (for “as soon as present”), differs from the functionality of traditional IM and Web conferencing applications is in its rich options for the *convocation* of meetings. When the software is installed, it automatically detects and imports IM contact information onto the Convoq identity server. The user can also add e-mail contacts. Once his contact list is set up, the user can request to meet with one or more people. If one of the contacts is unavailable, ASAP will initiate the meeting as soon as all invitees are *present*, i.e. available. Users also can assign stand-ins for themselves in particular contexts. For instance, a busy CEO can assign her CFO as a stand-in if an investor wants to meet or make the head of corporate communications the stand-in if a reporter calls.

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The conversation starts here.

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A similar ASAP feature, lifelines, allows users to set up alternate contacts for a particular *function* rather than a particular *person*. For example, a company could set up one lifeline for regular customer support and another for top-tier customers. The lifeline chooses at random (or in a predefined order) the first available contact in the lifeline and sets up a meeting with the requestor.

Convoq employs 29 people and is using its \$10-million second round of funding, closed in November 2003, to ramp up sales and marketing after its launch in late February. Annual subscriptions, which allow unlimited meetings among up to 25 people at a time, cost \$100 per year. Unlimited meetings for up to 5 people (which we find much more reasonable!) costs \$50 per year.