

Next big thing: COVITS predictions

When IT gurus gathered in Roanoke last month many of them talked about what's just over the horizon. Here's what some of them see

BY DEBORAH NASON






More than a thousand IT-focused professionals converged on Roanoke in September from 20 states and 18 countries to attend the Commonwealth of Virginia's Information Technology Symposium (COVITS) conference. Conversations with those attending and exhibitors yielded insights into some technology trends on the horizon. A wide array of individuals, locals and visitors, were asked: What is the Next Big Thing? Here are some of their opinions:

WiFi: Wireless fidelity, or WiFi, refers to a high-frequency wireless local area network.

Amy Ankrum, director of marketing for Christiansburg-based CCS-Inc., says WiFi and internet protocol (IP) telephony were the top new technologies of interest identified by a recent customer survey conducted by her company.

The finding is echoed by Verizon CEO Ivan Seidenberg in his conference presentation: "Disruptive technologies like WiFi and voice-over-IP are starting to gain traction and challenge conventional notions about industry structure and competition." Fittingly, Roanoke's free wireless Internet access zone officially opened at the COVITS opening reception.

WiFi is one of the major fo-

THE COVITS PANEL				
				
<i>Eugene Huang: Driven by biologists</i>	<i>Roy Mentkow: Municipal impact</i>	<i>Ravi Sethi: Outsourcing opportunities</i>	<i>Jon Merrill: Home capabilities large</i>	<i>Becky Gibbs: PCs getting smaller</i>

cus areas of the City of Roanoke's IT strategy. Roy Mentkow is director of technology for the City of Roanoke. "This will have an impact on areas such as the Building department, Parks and Recreation, and Fire Inspection," he says. "Instead of coming in to the office, they can communicate from the field – saving hours, increasing productivity and efficiency, and improving service to our customers." The other major IT focus areas, he says, are Geographic Information Systems, enterprise integration, e-government, customer service and security.

Norway native Anders Halvorsen is senior program manager with The World Information Technology and Services Alliance (WITSA), a consortium of IT industry associations from around the world. Taking the long view of WiFi, he says it is "now at level A [a beginning technology], and when it reaches level C [maturity], it will be handling data at high speeds and large quantities." He believes this is

a potential threat to existing cell service technologies, and suggests there may be attempts to discourage the growth of WiFi to protect economic interests.

IP telephony: This term refers to the exchange of voice, fax and other forms of information over the Internet.

Ravi Sethi, president of Avaya Labs, describes a corporate scenario where the use of IP telephony enabled members of a critical "decision team" to be located instantly across a widespread communication system of PCs, desk phones, mobile phones and PDAs. An emergency audio conference was also set up for the team through this technology.

How can small companies benefit from this technology? "This will give them the opportunity to outsource, or partner with larger companies," he says. "For example, a contractor working from home could log-in to his client's network

CONTINUED ON BACK

COVITS

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

using our 'Soft phone' software. This is a telephone switch, which allows him to have an additional identity as a part of the corporation. People could call him at a corporate extension and he could receive his calls at his home office."

Sethi says this technology has implications for franchisees, such as car dealers, as well as small independent companies who wish to band together for certain purposes. Is there a need for an advanced infrastructure? No, he says, the technology can even be used with dial-up access.

Remote connectivity: Thomas Shelman, CIO of Northrup Grumman, does not hesitate when asked for his notion of the Next Big Thing. "My employees are very spread out," he says. "Remote connectivity is essential." His company has successfully consolidated over 30 data centers over the last eight years, and a major element for that success is team communication centers and enterprise collaboration.

Information Lifecycle Management (ILM): According to StorageMagazine.com, "The concept of ILM revolves around managing data and its placement on different storage media, from birth to

death."

An exhibitor from Colorado-based StorageTek explained his company's approach to ILM, migrating from "online" to "inline" to "Nearline" to "archive" to "delete" options, as the data ages and declines in value. The issue of data value is a complex one, when looking at wide-ranging departmental and legal requirements.

Advanced home computing: Dr. Jon Merrill is an entrepreneur from northern Virginia (and an M.D.), who has established and sold nine IT startups. He is the CEO of Astute Technology, which develops health care information systems such as Webcasting, distance learning, medical illustration, and animation. Merrill says that people have more capabilities at their homes now than at their business places. "For example, the X-Box has more computing power than average corporate desktop PC at a fraction of the cost. There is going to be a big awakening in the next five to ten years." He adds, "there is so much technology in our homes that we're not leveraging yet. The smaller bells and whistles have greater implications than we realize."

Sensor networking: Becky Gibbs is senior vice president of Virtual IT, a Roanoke company. "PCs

are getting smaller and smaller," she says. "A lot of small sensors – actually small PCs – are monitoring things like gas station oil levels which trigger supply replenishment, utility usage levels which alert repairmen if the air conditioning is faulty, and products with 'smart tags' being tracked from warehouse to destination." She continues, "We'll see more of this as time goes by. Sensors will be on everything. The issue will be: how far will the government or people allow this to go?"

Bio-informatics. "Advances in IT technology today are not being driven by computer scientists," says Eugene Huang. "They're being driven by biologists." Huang is the deputy secretary of technology for the state of Virginia. He suggests the aging baby boomers will drive the demand for biotechnological applications. "This technology will soon be at a critical mass," he says, likening it to the evolution of the Internet. "It's like a bubbling cauldron." Virginia Tech will be in a good position to profit from this trend, he says, through its Virginia Bioinformatics Institute and its participation in a regional computing grid.

(Deborah Nason is a Roanoke-based freelance writer.)