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Article abstract

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Technical Evaluation Report

53. Audio/ Videoconferencing Packages: Low cost

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Abstract

A comparison was conducted of *Voxwire MeetingRoom* and *iVocalize* v4.1.0.3, both Web-conferencing products using voice-over-Internet protocol (VoIP) to provide unlimited, inexpensive, international audio communication, and high-quality Web-conferencing fostering collaborative learning. The study used the evaluation criteria used in earlier reports, including common technical framework, clarity, control, complexity, and costs. Criteria sub-divisions applying to one or more of the products' synchronous and asynchronous components are included in a side-by-side product comparison table. It is concluded that these two highly competitive products provide a serious challenge to the markets of their highly priced rivals. The report also contains a brief summary of *GRCLive*, another promising conferencing software, which the evaluation team attempted to evaluate, though gave up owing to technical difficulties.

Introduction

Given the increasing maturity of VoIP technologies, the evaluation team decided to examine two products (*Voxwire* and *iVocalize*) both with solid VoIP Web-conferencing capability, and features usually associated with higher priced collaboration packages (e.g., report #52). The report expands upon an earlier evaluation of *iVocalize* in this series (report #31). As the online free trial version provided by *iVocalize* is limited to a two-person Web-conference, and product demonstrations for *Voxwire* are provided via scheduled demonstrations, the necessary arrangements for the evaluation were made with the product vendors.

Product Trials

1. Voxwire

The *Voxwire MeetingRoom* provides unlimited computer-to-computer Web-conferencing application with features for synchronous audio and text-chat, browser-sharing, and presentations posted on the Internet. The meeting room is controlled by single or multiple moderators, with presentation and participant management features that can be pre-configured in the Room Configuration Panel, or modified during a session via the Moderator Menu. Moderators are able to synchronise all participant Web-browsers, poll the participants, mute the voice, and text chat of any participant, terminate participants, and, if necessary, ban them from returning to the conference for a specified duration. Participant features include synchronous audio, text-chat,

browser sharing, active participant list, adjustable text and presentation areas, a favorites list, active URLs in text-chat, adjustable text size, font, and colour, and private conversations. Presentations must be uploaded to the Internet prior to being presented, as *Voxwire* does not currently have an integrated file upload feature. The combination of moderator and participant features is controlled in a simple and intuitive interface. *Voxwire MeetingRoom* has limited collaboration and recording features, and appears to be more appropriate for larger group presentations.

Currently, *Voxwire* has limited support for older PC's (e.g., Pentium III with Windows/98), or for Web-browsers other than *Internet Explorer 6*. *Macintosh*, *Unix,* and *Linux* operating systems are not currently supported. *Voxwire* is available primarily as a hosted service, though, as Appendix I shows, private hosting is available at a substantially higher cost that may be beyond the reach of many educational institutions.

2. iVocalize

Since the previous *iVocalize* evaluation in (report #31), a new version has been released (v4.1.0.3), containing some changes of note. The audio/ text-chat helpdesk service is no longer available, and only email support is now provided. *Mac* and *Linux* support has been added since the previous review. Regrettably, the software purchase plan has been withdrawn, and only rental options for rooms and servers are now available.

Participant user features still include synchronous audio and text-chat; time-stamp on text entries; private conversations; active participant list; website/ presentation navigation; adjustable text area; favourites list; and active URLs in text-chat. The shared whiteboard includes a useful *PowerPoint* converter that allows for the synchronous presentations of slides, which can be annotated, as well as a screen capture mechanism that allows participants to capture images of any document, screen, or image. The accessibility features detailed in the earlier report now include improvements to the recording features using *Java* technology. Participants have the option of creating recordings than can be played back at a later date in a *Java*-enabled browser that synchronises mp3 audio, text-chat and websites/ slides presented in the main room. The recording files (.html, .jar, .bin, .mp3) are saved to the users' PC. Applications-sharing and file-transfer features announced in the 2004 review are still not included. As with *Voxwire*, the *iVocalize* conference room is controlled by moderators using a simple and intuitive interface. Moderators can synchronise participant browser windows, mute participant audio and chat, and disconnect participants as required, but cannot ban a participant unless they have room administration privileges. Private chat, presentation recording, and individual participant Web-browsing can be enabled or disabled in the room configuration, and blanket levels of annotation capability can be assigned to the participants and individualized during the session by a moderator.

It is to be hoped that the changes observed since the earlier review do not indicate that the *iVocalize* product is in difficulty, as it is a valuable audio-conferencing option for educational users.

3. GRCLive

GRCLive is a collaboration and conferencing software produced by *Grassroots Communications*. Three levels of conferencing are offered: *GRC Lite*, *GRC Business Edition*, and *GRC Pro*. Common to all three products are secure document and application sharing, file storage and transfer, Web-browser sharing, text-chat, document printing, calendar, and scheduling. The

Business Edition adds audio and multipoint videoconferencing capabilities, session recording and playback, remote desktop, and instant messaging features. The top-tier *GRC Pro* contains all of these features, plus VoIP dialing and polling.

Pricing for *GRC Lite* begins at $29.95 USD per month for five concurrent users, and increases incrementally to $449.95 per month for 25 concurrent users using *GRC Pro*. At the time of writing, *GRC* and its parent company, *Newport*, offer limited technical support for this product, and the current evaluation was halted when technical problems were encountered, which could not be resolved. *GRCLive* has also developed a new product entitled *Conga*, whereby users can instantly share documents, use VoIP calling, participate in text/ audio/ videoconferences, and send instant messages through *Yahoo Messenger*, *AIM*, *MSN Messenger*, and *ICQ*. *Conga* is currently available in beta edition, though internal sources suggest that resources for its continued development, evaluation, and testing are also unlikely to be made available before early 2006.

Conclusions

Voxwire and *iVocalize* are both user-friendly, cost-effective options for online audioconferencing, briefings, and presentations to large audiences. The comparison of the two products indicates that *iVocalize*, in particular, provides impressive capabilities comparing well to the features usually associated with higher priced collaboration packages (see report #52). In addition, *iVocalize*'s minimum system requirements are considerably less than those required for *Voxwire* (see the comparison table provided at the end of this report in the Appendix). The *iVocalize* developers appear to have concentrated on adding collaborative tools such as a sharable whiteboard, and joint uploading/ annotation of presentations and images. Another valuable feature, not provided in *Voxwire*, is the ability for participants and moderators to record and playback sessions at a later date using Web and mp3 technologies. *Voxwire*'s strengths are in its marketing and customer service options, with better documentation, a comprehensive website, and the flexibility for clients to deploy the product from their own server. In addition, *Voxwire* has a polling feature.

Given the opportunity to use both products, the evaluators chose to use *iVocalize* to collaborate at a distance in creating this report. Its presentation and asynchronous features make it a superior tool for distance educators who require a collaborative learning environment using VoIP technology. Little advantage appears to be gained in the use of highly expensive conferencing products such as those examined in the previous report #52. *iVocalize* and *Voxwire* appear positioned to provide these higher priced software packages with a "run for their money." *GRCLive* is a promising product in this genre, though currently lacking in technical support.

> **N.B.** Owing to the speed with which Web addresses become outdated, online references are not cited in this report. They are available, together with updates to the current report, at the Athabasca University software evaluation site: *http://cde.athabascau.ca/softeval/*. Italicized product names in this report can be assumed to be registered industrial or trademarks.

JPB. Series Editor, Technical Evaluation Reports

APPENDIX I: Comparison of the two main products

	Voxwire Meeting Room	*iVocalize* v4.1.0.3
COMMON TECHNICAL FRAMEWORK		
Product launch	2003	2002; current version hosted by vendor only.
Purchase/rental options	Managed or Private Server. The managed server is recommended for groups of 1000+. (See Costs section for scalability details.)	Earlier versions were available as freeware or as one-time license purchases. Most recent version (v4.1.0.3) has 1000+ seats. (See Costs section for scalability details.)
Minimum System Requirements (user)	*Pentium IV* or compatible; 256 MB RAM; *Windows 2000;* *Internet Explorer 6;* 56K dial-up connection; hard Drive free space: 10 MB.	266 MHz *Pentium* computer; 64 MB RAM; *Windows 98 SE ;* *Internet Explorer 6;* 56K dial-up connection; *Java v1.3* to play recorded presentations
	Macintosh, Unix, and *Linux* operating systems are not currently supported.	System requirements for *Mac* and *Linux,* and lesser used browsers (*Netscape, Firefox, Mozilla, Safari*)

	Voxwire MeetingRoom	iVocalize v4.1.0.3
FEATURES		
Whiteboard	None	Shared with synchronous and interactive annotation; not easily printable or saveable; icon for easy upload of *PowerPoint* and image files.
Presentations	*PowerPoint* presentations cannot be uploaded directly; prior uploading of individual slides enables viewing through co-browser technology; slides must be converted by user into .jpg or .gif formats, or using vendor's conversion service; presentations cannot be annotated .	Uploaded into whiteboard window; *PowerPoint* presentations can be uploaded directly; *PowerPoint* button on whiteboard toolbar; *PowerPoint 2000* format, without special effects (as with larger commercial conferencing packages); maximum file size: 3MB.
Chat	Participants and moderators can send group/ private text messages; text color and font options.	Participants and moderators can send group/ private text messages; text color and font options.
Recording	None	Moderator and participants can record presentation simultaneously; presentation saved as html, with option of viewing presentation, text chat, and slides with mp3 audio.
Keyboard shortcuts	Yes	Yes
Polling	Yes	No
Screen capture	No	Enables participants to share screen displays
COMPLEXITY		
Registration/Purchase	MasterCard/ Visa/ American Express credit card	MasterCard/ Visa/ American Express credit card; PayPal preferred.
Login	24/7 access to private conference room; individual user name and passwords accounts; guest links sent to participants, or option to place graphic button on website.	24/7 access to private conference room; individual user name and passwords accounts.
Customisation	Brandable interface; clear, logical configuration of window layout and colour scheme.	Brandable interface; multilingual; clear, logical configuration of window layout and colour scheme; customised login page and URL (yourname.ivocalize.net).

	Voxwire MeetingRoom	iVocalize v4.1.0.3
CLARITY		
Audio	Clear	Clearer than *Voxwire*
Intuitivity	Easy to use;	Easy to use;
	chat, private chat, and audio all intuitive.	chat, private chat, and audio all intuitive.
Technical support	FAQ;	FAQ;
	telephone support, pay-on-demand;	user's guide
		Room Control Panel (for room manager);
	troubleshooting guide;	
	e-mail support;	e-mail support;
	onscreen "bubble help".	rollovers on menus only;
		Help button in Help menu did not work team during this evaluation.
Accessibility	Options menu with limited accessibility sub-menu	Numerous items on Help menu
CONTROL		
Moderator controls	Room Configuration Panel specifies control features for participants in advance (no recording or annotation);	Room Manager specifies control features for participants in advance; multiple presentations by multiple moderators;
	multiple presentations by multiple moderators, but presentations must be uploaded to web site;	moderator synchronisation helps differentiate control between moderators and their presentations;
	"Follow me" control: moderator can sync web pages to ensure that all users see the same page. With multiple moderators, only one may activate the "Follow Me" mode;	"Synchronized browsing": moderator can sync web pages to ensure that all users see the same page. With multiple moderators only one may activate the "Synchronized browsing" mode;
	moderator can terminate a participant from a session or ban a participant from a room;	
		moderator can only ban a participant through the Activity Section of room control;
	moderator options include private text messaging, and sending a single web page to participants.	moderator options include private text messaging, and sending a single web page to participants.
Co-browsing	Controlled by moderator only; participants follow moderator's browser.	Between moderator and participants.
COSTS		
Set-up fee	One-time $15 setup fee, plus room costs (below):	No

	Voxwire MeetingRoom	iVocalize v4.1.0.3
Usage costs	Personal Meeting Room • 2 concurrent users - $9.95/mo. • 5 concurrent users - $14.95/mo. Group Meeting Room • 10 concurrent users - $29.95/mo. • 100 concurrent users - $164.95/mo • 1000 concurrent users - $1,514.95/mo • 1000 + available Managed Server • Rent a server managed by Voxwire • Setup - $200, Monthly fee - $200 Private Server • Install *Voxwire* on your server • Installation - $2995 • 500 seats (min) - $5 per seat/mo. • 10,001 – 50,000 - $2 per seat/mo.	Personal/Group Conference Room • Charged per user • 3 concurrent users - $15.00/mo. • 5 concurrent users - $20.00/mo. • 10 concurrent users - $40.00/mo. • 20 concurrent users - $70.00/mo. • 30 concurrent users - $100.00/mo. • 50 concurrent users - $150.00/mo. • 100 concurrent users - $300.00/mo • 150+ available for quoted cost Multiple Room Packages • Multiple independent rooms • Flat rate per room, unlimited use Virtual Server Packages • Rent server from iVocalize • Ability to create own conference rooms • Price dependent on number of concurrent users
Technical support	Telephone support, pay-on-demand: $25/15 minutes	Very limited, no cost
Extras	Conversion of *PowerPoint* slides: $49.95 for up to 10 slides, and $5 per slide for additional slides	No extra costs

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