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SunWorld

The Magazine for Advanced Systems Computing

June 1992 \$3.95

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The killer app?

By Martin L.W. Hall

GROUPWARE — UNTIL NOW IT'S BEEN A PROMISE UNFULFILLED. DOES INSOFT HAVE THE ANSWER?



Communicate represents a logical step in improving computers as communications devices.

You've probably never heard of tiny InSoft Inc., a start-up consisting of a dozen people along the shores of the Susquehanna River in Grantham, PA, but you will.

SunWorld first learned of InSoft a year or so ago when the president, Dan Harple, called an editor. Toward the end of the conversation, Harple told, in secretive terms, of a "network groupware application" InSoft was working on that had elements of e-mail, shared desktops, file sharing, and multimedia. Harple promised it was to be totally unlike anything seen before.

The editor chalked up the conversation to Harple being yet another software developer who read one too many chapters of Guy Kawasaki's book on evangelizing his product. But Harple was right. InSoft's new product, *Communicate*, is unlike anything we've seen before. It's the killer app Sun had all but given up hope waiting for.

The key to a killer app is its ability to exploit the hardware's unique features and create value no other software-hardware combination can match. It is software so compelling a user will defy bureaucrats and buy hardware foreign to the organization just to get it.

First, *Communicate* is inherently a workgroup application. In fact, a single user would find no use for it. Today, *Communicate* works on SPARC computers using a conventional Ethernet or TCP/IP network, with dial-up access planned.

When a user invokes *Communicate*, the primary window shows an empty "conference room." The user fills the conference room with icons representing users on the network. When a conference begins, users selected can choose whether to participate or not. Participating conference members see a new window on their desktop. The new window is a shared "whiteboard," and allows users to create simultaneously or manipulate objects

using simple paint tools.

What makes the shared whiteboard interesting is *Communicate*'s ability to place a CAD or drawing file as the backdrop for the whiteboard. In an engineering department, for example, a designer can paste a drawing to everyone's whiteboard and ask for suggestions. Because *Communicate* employs the SPARCstation's sound features, it allows each user to speak and listen to the group.

Communicate has several other notable features. Users need not distribute files via the whiteboard. Using the program, a user can pick up a file and drop it on another user's icon — the file is copied to that person's directory without you needing to know the target home directory or have permissions to write to another user's home. *Communicate* can even use still motion video; one could use *VideoPix* to share an image with other users.

While *Communicate*'s features are interesting, it's their combined abilities, and of expected abilities to come, that are most exciting. Until now, computers had allowed us to be more productive individuals.

With *Communicate*, distant team members or lack of a meeting space is no longer a barrier to conducting a meeting. But more than that, *Communicate* represents the next logical step in improving computers as communications devices, taking us beyond the batch-rooted nature of e-mail to the more modern integration of voice, real-time file manipulation, and telecommunications in a single device. You'll see — this is the killer app.

Incidentally, InSoft won't have this market to itself for long. Lexington, KY-based DataBeam showed a prototype of a less-ambitious conferencing application at *SunWorld Expo*. ■

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