



Jonathan Margolis

# When worlds collide

Jonathan Margolis explores the wonderful new world of talking emails and readable voicemails

**T**he name of the game in small-business technology these days is convergence. What does that mean? Easy, it's about carrying as few gadgets around with you as possible.

Here's a prime example of convergence. When I went into business on my own 12 years ago, mobile phones were just about affordable and becoming a business necessity. But I didn't much like the way they demanded an immediate response. A memo (remember them?), an email or an answerphone message gave you a certain amount of thinking and reacting time. But a mobile phone call demanded action now, something as a small-business owner, you are not always able or willing to supply.

My solution, which worked for me very well for about five years, was that long-forgotten gadget of the early 1990s, the message bleeper. I kept my phone switched off (which was a good idea because battery life back then was pathetic), received messages as they came in, and dealt with them as I preferred – which could mean anything from totally ignoring them (the best policy for nagging messages from the bank) to phoning back instantly on the mobile.

The fact that this system required two gadgets, the bleeper and the phone, didn't worry me – until text messages and reliable mobile voicemail came along and rendered the bleeper obsolete overnight. They disappeared from sale in 2000.

By then, however, communication had got much more complicated. Nowadays, you can't be serious about running your small business unless you have email on the hoof as well. Which means, even if you have a BlackBerry real-time email phone, a lot of complication and fuffing around. There's nothing quite as annoying as receiving an email just when you don't want it.

Two of the most irritating things we have to do several times a day are dialling into voicemail and having to listen to people huff and puff and stumble as they attempt to reach the point of what they are saying; and reading BlackBerry mail or alternatively downloading

email onto slow and creaky WAP mobile phones. But two brilliant convergence-type services have recently begun to simplify both operations and reassert the primacy of the mobile phone, with its time-honoured central killer applications – voice calls and texting.

The first such service is an absolute corker, which wowed me from the moment I started using it six months ago. In all that time, I've not had to listen to a single rambling voicemail, because the new application, called Spinvox [www.spinvox.com](http://www.spinvox.com) magically transcribes them within seconds into easily and swiftly-read text messages.

What is amazing is that Spinvox's voice-to-text software seems practically faultless. I spent much of my first SpinVox-enabled weekend leaving myself increasingly insane test voicemails and waiting for the software to blunder. 'Do you have the necessary xylophones for the rhythms in the separate deoxyribonucleic acid and photo synthesis sequences?' I said. The message was lexed faithfully within a minute or two; only one glitch was that 'sequences' came out as 'frequencies'. Well, I had drunk half a bottle of red wine at the time.

SpinVox even coped with pretend speech impediments. 'Hellow Wichard, it'th Walph. Did Wachel return the video of Woger Wabbit that Woy gave to Wobert and did she get a welfund? Thankth. To be fwank I thought it was weally, weally wubbish.' This one took two minutes, but was perfect, with all the Rs re-rolled.

When one's callers are on the loquacious side, to be fair, these transcribed voicemails can get a wee bit tedious. With apologies to my wife, here, in its glorious entirety, is one text I received while happily pootling around in the garden the other day: 'Jonathan, I've been trying to reach you for 20 minutes. You've got your phone on silent, haven't you? I'm stuck in Waitrose, I can't manage the shopping and I need someone to come and help me. It's just I really wish you wouldn't have your mobile turned off all the time and I don't know what to do now.'

The second fantastic service I've just started using also has a voice-recognition



Clear and simple website explains everything you need to know

element, but works the other way round. MobilePA, [www.mobilepa.com](http://www.mobilepa.com), enables you to use your mobile phone, smartphone or wireless PDA to access your email while on the move – which can mean, if you are using the right wireless headset, even while you are driving. You can also write emails in a quite bizarre way whilst on the run.

MobilePA links up with your email server by a series of complicated (but once-only) manoeuvres and will then, when you phone in to a special number, read your emails to you in a robotic but easily understood voice. You can then respond to the emails by speaking. The recipient will get a link to a voice file, which he then, supposedly, listens to.

I doubt myself that too many people receiving such an audio link will actually bother listening to it – it's a bit of a clumsy move in the middle of a working day – but that, of course, is their choice. You've responded from a situation (especially driving) where you wouldn't normally be able to.

Which, of course, can make all the difference in a business deal.

While Spinvox is a singularly focussed little application, doing just what it says on the tin but (thankfully) no more, MobilePA actually comes with a garnish of slightly redundant functionality. It can synchronise with your calendar and contacts, if you really can be bothered to do it and will also read you stories from the day's news (plus many other slightly pointless things) if you are an absolute sucker for complicating your life in the name of simplicity.

It will, for example, archive up to 10,000 emails and instantly find relevant items from among them. Don't let my scepticism put you off – of course, this could be just what you need for your business.

And don't let it obscure the fact that MobilePA is, like Spinvox, a terrific way of increasing productivity, use of time and decreasing complication stress – and all for not very much outlay.

**LINKS** Richmond Chamber of Commerce is holding a series of seminars throughout 2005 on mobile working. For more details please contact Dan Jones: [dan.jones@richmondchamber.co.uk](mailto:dan.jones@richmondchamber.co.uk). Tel: 020 8939 1732