SUNGARD AVAILABILITY SERVICES
RECOVER ANYWHERE™

Roll up!

The emergency and mass notification software market may be fledgling, but there is already plenty out there to choose from. David Adams goes shopping

As demand for mass notification solutions has grown over the past decade, some very sophisticated products have come onto the market. New features have been added and security and redundancy improved. Most importantly, integration capabilities have been enhanced, meaning solutions can be linked more effectively to in-house HR systems and other data sources; and integrated with (or in some cases supplied as modules within) broader business continuity solutions.

As internet technologies have matured, more of these solutions have become web-based, enabling greater flexibility and third party collaborative capabilities. One such example, Enera's hosted RapidReach ENS WEB service, requires only an internet connection and a web browser, but provides user organisations with a shared bulletin board to be used by authorised personnel for posting documents and information during recovery. Coupled with this, solutions are now able to exploit mobile communication channels and devices, such as BlackBerrys, iPhones and other smartphones.

Yet for all these impressive new features, the most fundamental requirement remains ease of use. "Our hope is that people can use the system without any training," says Michael Gambacorta, online marketing specialist at Send Word Now. Simplicity means speed.

He cites an example: in 2008 Wal-Mart used Send Word Now's WeatherBlast service to alert staff in Alabama that a tornado was heading their way. "That meant they were able to get everyone under cover, so when the tornado then actually hit the store and did a lot of damage, no staff or customers were hurt."

Speed is of the essence in deployments of notification systems. The London Underground maintenance provider CMO (now part of LU) has used PageOne's SMS messaging system Connect since 2004. The system played a role in helping the company's response to the tube bombings on 7/7, but is also used daily to help keep the tube running through technical failures or extreme weather.

Mike Booth, senior duty operations manager, engineering, at LU, outlines a recent example of the system in action, describing how torrential rain caused disruption to services on four Underground lines. "We used the paging system to let people know what we were doing minute by minute. We had to let people know how we were going to get the trains ready for the next day. We were also notifying managers about flooding and signal failures at various stations."

Nor does such ease of use mean notification solutions can't cope with complex requirements. "Most of our clients have been with us for at least five years, some ten years," says Ian Hammond, CEO

at Criticall. "Over that length of time the way they do things will change. They may reorganise the corporate structure. The way people belong to groups could move away from being organised by geography to a more departmental model. Your [notification] system needs to be able to cope with that."

Investment management company, Man Group, purchased Criticall's EmergencyCall notification product in 2008, rolling out the solution to all its offices globally, enabling communication with more than 1,500 staff. "We do regular rehearsals with all our locations, at least twice a year," says Ann Clark, head of business continuity at Man Group. "It's easy to use, so if something does happen it just takes five minutes to get a message out." The solution has already proved its worth in helping the company cope with events like the heavy snowfall that paralysed large parts of the UK in 2009 and 2010 and the G20 protests in 2009. It's also used each day by Man's IT function, sending out thousands of messages each year alerting personnel to IT problems.

Irish airline Aer Lingus purchased Enera's RapidReach in 2006, to be used in the event of an aircraft being involved in a serious incident. An initial call-out might involve alerting 30 to 35 key people, but the system can be used to contact more than 300 staff. "It's exceptionally easy to use: you can call teams what you like, can arrange it as it suits you," says Joan Kane, emergency planning specialist at Aer Lingus. "And there are other uses of the system which we haven't taken advantage of yet. We're thinking we should be using it for more

SUNGARD AVAILABILITY SERVICES
RECOVER ANYWHERE™

than just emergency response."

Most notification systems now boast improved integration capabilities. Criticall is one of a number of providers to have improved data collection and cleaning processes. "We have a number of filters that we use to flag up dirty HR data and we have a data integration process that cleans the data," says Hammond.

Whether services are implemented in-house or provided on a hosted basis, a growing number now form part of a larger business continuity, or a crisis/incident management solution. Vocal has added incident management and continuity plan management capabilities to its iModus solution. End users include insurers Brit and the Catlin Group. A new version, iModus 2, will be launched in the fourth quarter of 2010: a multi-lingual, enterprise solution incorporating plan management, document management and incident management modules. A slimmed-down solution for smaller organisations will also be available.

SunGard now offers US company Varoli's NotiFind notification solution either as a standalone product or as part of SunGard's Continuity Management Solution; while ICM has relaunched its Shadow-Planner business continuity planning application to incorporate web and mobile-enabled notification capabilities. Managing director Mike Osborne says the new development is the product of a realisation that many larger organisations have invested heavily in both notification and business continuity management, but that the solutions are often still separate from each other. It has also created an entry level broadcast notification tool for smaller organisations, with HR

data used to send out a basic broadcast message to the whole department, or to specific people in a building. This message might instruct people to check an emergency website or phone a number for further instructions.

There will also be a BlackBerry application included in the new version of ICM's tool. "That allows you to build very complex plans and to access the documents and data you need from the BlackBerry," says Osborne. He also suggests that in future more use might be made of the ability to track the physical whereabouts of individuals using location-based mobile solutions.

Clair Cawley, director of marketing at PageOne Communications, highlights the value of a notification solution being used for non-emergency functions and so becoming embedded within an organisation's normal working culture. She believes that the ever-present need to identify more cost efficiencies may be helping to drive this trend. "Lots of organisations are looking at how they can get the most out of the products they use," she says. "If they embed communications systems into day-to-day work they get the benefit from using it every day and then, when something does happen, they're comfortable using the system."

There are other features added by providers in recent years worth mentioning. Vocal's iModus includes a feature called PrefMail, that guarantees email notifications cannot be ignored, with the highest priority messages locking up a PC until they are acknowledged. Criticall's EmergencyCall is one of several solutions on the market with a re-initiate function that makes it easy to re-send messages to only, for example, just the 500 out of 2,000

recipients who have failed to respond to an initial message. Several solutions also now use a conference call feature that puts key personnel in touch with each other, wherever they might be, as quickly as possible. Send Word Now's BlackBerry application can also use BlackBerry PIN messages rather than using email, opening up another potential route for messaging if other voice and text networks are down.

Indeed, amid all the shiny new services, the concepts of redundancy and of there always being another route through which an alert or message can be sent, remain at the very heart of notification. "We've always had the ability to get the message through when all the usual channels are down," says James Golding, marketing manager at Vocal. "Our SIM cards will search for a network, ensuring people are not constrained by a particular provider."

Criticall has also worked to ensure that its users' mobile phones will never be rendered useless by overloaded operator networks. "You need three SMS aggregators," says Ian Hammond. "If you use one aggregator and they say they have connections to all the major mobile networks, that sounds good, but in fact that means you just have one connection into all of them. We have three aggregators at any one time and each has multiple connections."

Notification is now a truly varied market. Somewhere out there should be a solution that suits even the most unusual requirements. If you just take the necessary time and care over implementation and/or a service level agreement, then, if the worst does happen, at least raising the alarm should be reassuringly straightforward.