

VERTICAL SLICE: SPEECH RECOGNITION

Voice of optimism

SPEECH MARKET SET TO EXPERIENCE PHENOMENAL GROWTH

By Stephen Yeo

WITH more and more users becoming acclimatised to self-service, voice activated business solutions, technology players are getting bullish about the potentials of automated speech recognition.

According to research firm Frost & Sullivan, the Asia Pacific speech recognition market is expected to grow to US\$27 million by 2005. In a recent report, the company attributes future growth in the Asia Pacific speech industry to the continuous improvements of speech technology products, growing acceptance of VoiceXML and vertical specialisation.

"Speech recognition software is one of the fastest growing technologies in Asia Pacific," said Manoj Menon, director of Frost & Sullivan Technology Practice (Asia Pacific). "Speech solutions are delivering on ROI and improving customer satisfaction, which should see the industry grow significantly over the next few years."

However, like many other sectors in the technology space, the speech market has seen a consolidation of market players. Just last year, industry leader ScanSoft merged with SpeechWorks in August under the name ScanSoft. (Some media friends suggested that the company should have called itself "SpeechSoft" for better effect, but that's beside the point.) The real issue is: Does the consolidation mean lesser choice for users? Not necessarily. "With their combined scale," said Manoj, "the bigger players can commit more resources to R&D and innovations will be more focused due to the concentrated effort."

ScanSoft, whose laundry list of customers includes Microsoft, Qantas Airways, Comfort Taxis, Singapore Telecom and Korean National Tourism Commission, accounts for 30.4% of Asia Pacific market share in 2002.

Late last year, the post-merger ScanSoft released its new OpenSpeech Recognizer 2.0 software, the first



Chidiac: Improved accuracy and multilingual support will enhance experience with speech solutions.



Chong: Voice hosting is a new market with great potentials.

commercially available speech recognition engine to support distributed speech recognition (DSR). DSR is an architecture that divides speech processing between a handset and a network server, enabling superior speech recognition accuracy while reducing transmission bandwidth requirements in wireless environments.

Based on open standards, OpenSpeech Recognizer 2.0 boasts a unique active noise cancellation technology that eliminates background noise, thus improving out-of-the-box accuracy for wireless and noisy environments.

While the kind of interaction that Data has on *Star Trek* remains a remote possibility, Peter Chidiac, ScanSoft's regional director of Network Speech Solutions in Asia Pacific, noted that improved accuracy and fuller support for different languages and speaking styles will enhance our experiences with automated speech solutions.

OpenSpeech Recognizer, for instance, features a patented LEARN capability that automatically adapts based on caller usage. It also offers full multilingual capabilities that allow any combination of 20 supported languages to be mixed within a single utterance.

Agreeing with the Frost & Sullivan report, Chidiac believes the growth

potential for speech solutions in the Asia Pacific region is good. For enterprises, deploying speech solutions will provide high value experiences to customers, he said. In the case of call centres, for example, it will help to free up the time of operators to handle more complex queries.

This optimism about the speech market is shared by Chong Wei Khee, managing director of In-One Technology Pte Ltd, based in Singapore. The company, which is founded in 1998, specialises in products and solutions that offer

enterprise customers the ability to speech-enable their Web-based applications and Web sites. Its flagship product – Dynamic Voice Server (DVS) – has recently been nominated to participate in the Asia Pacific Information and Communications Technology Awards, an event organised by the Association of Thai Computer Industry and supported by the Thai government.

Based on an open architecture using VoiceXML, DVS can be integrated with all the popular Web-based technologies without any costly disruption and restructuring. According to Chong, the DVS solution is so easy to customise that anyone who is familiar with Web programming can make changes to it.

To facilitate the implementation of speech solutions, In-One even offers fully managed voice hosting services at a reasonable fee. By engaging In-One's services, said Chong, companies will be able to deploy enterprise applications up to 90% faster than with traditional interactive voice response (IVR) platforms.

As an example, Chong cited the case of Qian Hu Corp., which adopted the DVS solution to roll out an intelligent voice recognition customer care management system known as Qian Hu Voice.

More information on In-One's offerings can be obtained via www.in-one.com. e