Lotus Connections via "The Cloud"

By Chuck Connell

IBM/Lotus Connections is business-oriented social network software. The idea is a private, secure Facebook for office environments. A full installation of Connections on your own servers is a significant task, but you can get started quickly by renting the application from LotusLive, at a great price.

IBM/Lotus Connections wants to be your company's Facebook. Of course, no organization wants employees to waste time gossiping about who is dating whom, so the aim of Connections is "business networking". While the definition of this term is sometimes in the eye of the beholder, it usually includes services such as

- Keeping track of who you know within the company

- Organizing your contacts into various interest groups

- Tracking project, tasks, and deadlines

- Sharing files

- Instant messaging

- Stored messaging to people who are not logged on

- Maintaining company-confidential wikis

- Status updates about your activities and responses to other people's updates

- Mini-blogs and discussions on work-related topics

This is the product niche that Connections addresses.

Since Connections is a feature-rich product, the server infrastructure to support it is fairly complex. A minimum pilot installation of Connections requires you to create a new server and install Websphere Application Server, DB2 Express, Tivoli Directory Integrator, and Connections itself. A robust enterprise-grade installation can require 10 servers with separate machines for an RDBMS, LDAP, Tivoli, a network file share, redundant HTTP servers, and redundant Connections servers.

There is a much easier way though: The LotusLive software-as-a-service (SaaS) from IBM allows you to "rent" Connections for just $6/month. For this fee, you can invite an unlimited number of people to join your Connections network, both people within your organization and outside team members. So for $72 per year, you can use Lotus Connections with no setup time or

infrastructure costs. Notice that I did not say $72 per year per user. The price is fixed, for any number of users!

One caveat: The $6/month LotusLive version of Connections does not contain all the features you can get with your own installed version. In particular, it does not contain wikis, blogs, or stored messaging between users. But it does contain a lot, for a great price.

I tested LotusLive Connections by setting up a free trial, which allows up to 99 users. The sign-up / set-up process is simple and fast. The administrative interface is fairly intuitive, so the learning curve is low. The features I found and tested are:

- Contacts. I invited other users to join my Connections network. They received an email from IBM containing logon instructions and had no problems doing so. I was able to organize my contacts into logical groups of "communities" within my Connections interface.

- Projects. Connections contains an impressive project management feature, given its price. An overall project is called an "activity", within which can be sub-projects (sections), tasks (entries) and action (to do) items. These project parts can have priorities, due dates, and person assignments.

- File sharing, with standard features.

- Instant messaging. The Connections IM feature makes direct use of the Lotus Sametime product, by allowing you to download the standalone Sametime client. Since this is a SaaS product, IBM runs the Sametime server that you connect to. My IBM server IM accounts were waiting for me, after I registered users within Connections.

  This feature alone is worth the price of admission. You can run a complete IM infrastructure for all the people in your company for just $6 per month! If you already have a Lotus Notes shop, you can use the embedded Sametime features in the Notes client, with the same results.

- Skype. LotusLive Connections allows you to add this application within the Connections dashboard. Since every businessperson I know already has Skype installed on their desktop however, this feature will probably not be as useful as the others.

Why would IBM charge so little for an unlimited number of people to use such a feature-rich product? Because it is a loss-leader. IBM hopes you like the LotusLive experience so much that you upgrade to one of its pricier offerings, which include additional capabilities such as online meetings, desktop sharing, forms creation, event management, polling, and a full email client. The price for expanded LotusLive products tops out at $10 per user per month.

For further information…

http://www.lotus.com/connections -- Connections product home page.

http://www.lotuslive.com/connections -- LotusLive Connections page.

http://www.lotuslive.com -- LotusLive home page.

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