Joining the dots of business communications
The need for a balanced and coordinated approach

By Dale Vile, January 2009

In a nutshell:

IT and communications vendors are positioning unified communications very heavily at the moment, but there are no magic bullets. Success is dependent on defining the problem in your own terms, not the suppliers', and going into initiatives with your eyes fully open to the challenges.

Key points:

- Many accept fragmented communications without giving it a second thought

- Yet the impact of inefficiency at both a personal and business level is significant

- Unified communications can help but let your needs, not suppliers, define your priorities

- Successful adoption depends on a coordinated multi-disciplinary approach

Few of us lose sleep over business communications. We have telephones, email, instant messaging and all manner of other mechanisms at our fingertips. And let's face it, none of them are exactly difficult to use. So why all the fuss about this thing called 'unified communications'? After all, if it ain't broke, why try to fix it?

Well before we run away with the notion that all is perfect in the business communications world, it is worth considering how many of the phone calls we make actually lead to a live conversation with the person we are trying to reach. Probably about 1 in 4 on average. Then when we can't get through we leave a voice mail, try the person on one of their other numbers (knowing that the odds are that we'll reach another voice mail box), or perhaps send them an electronic message in some form or another. It is then a case of keeping our fingers crossed and hoping they will get back to us in a reasonable amount of time, and when they don't we sometimes get irritated.

And here's the interesting thing, we get irritated at the person, not the highly fragmented and inefficient set of communication mechanisms we have just wasted time trying to navigate through. If we turn this around and think about how many numbers and addresses people have to use to reach us as individuals, and how many inboxes we ourselves need to check to keep on top of things, it becomes clear that that we are all suffering from having to manage a range of mechanisms that, while each simple in their own right, together create quite a complex business communications landscape.

Apart from the inconvenience and irritation factor, fragmentation of business communications leads to lost productivity, process interruptions, and business decisions being delayed, or worst still, being made without important input from everyone concerned because some people could not be reached in time. All in all, the current state of affairs translates directly to unnecessarily high cost and risk to the business. Yet we accept this because that's the way it has always been.

This brings us back to the point of unified communications (UC). The truth is that with the technology available today in this space, we no longer have to live with the complexity that has sneaked up on us over the past decade or two. We can now do something about it.

So how does UC address the issues we have been discussing? Before going any further, it is worth taking time out look at some of the key capabilities UC brings us:

> **Presence awareness** – the ability to know who is available on which device
>
> **Rules based routing** – allowing the UC system to route calls and messages appropriately based on a combination of presence awareness, user preferences and other information, such as whether the person's diary says they are free or in a meeting.
>
> **Device awareness** – allowing the 'richness' or 'mode' of communication to be adjusted appropriately depending on device capabilities so that, for example, we don't end up trying to initiate a video call with someone currently using an audio-only device.
>
> **Media transformation** – the concept of 'listening to an email', 'reading a voicemail', and similar tricks, so the message gets through on one form or another regardless.
>
> **Unified directories** – a single address book record per contact synchronised to all devices as necessary.
>
> **Unified inbox** – one place to receive all inbound voice and data messages.

With these capabilities in place we can cut down the number of phone numbers and addresses people need to use to reach us, and even when multiple 'handles' are necessary, make sure everything gets routed to us appropriately and efficiently. This kind of unified approach to communications can not only streamline business operations today, but protect our individual sanity and prevent future cost and risk to the business as communication and collaboration mechanisms continue to proliferate. It is only a matter of time, for example, before video calling, web conferencing, desktop sharing, etc become an integral part of the communications landscape. In fact in some organisations they already are.

On a practical level, if we look at what it takes to get a UC solution working effectively, it is important to coordinate across a number of different domains. While not strictly necessary, UC generally goes hand in hand with converged IP communications at a network level, i.e. with voice, video and data coming together onto the same physical infrastructure. At the same time, we need to consider UC from an applications perspective. If implemented well, UC allows the user to see the presence of information and offers 'click to communicate' capability in lots of different scenarios. This could be 'click to call' on a PC desktop from an email or collaboration system, 'click to conference' from a mobile application running on a handheld, or having calls routed to your hotel room via a soft phone running on your laptop. And the fact that the possibilities on the application side of the equation are wide and varied means that UC can (indeed should) have a significant impact on how the business works at both a process and individual user level.

Critical to the success of a UC initiative is therefore making sure enough attention is paid to all four dimensions – the communications infrastructure, application integration, end user experience/behaviour, and the impact on the business – the latter ideally being the pivot for the overall business case.

Given this, one of the biggest mistakes anyone considering a unified communications (UC) initiative can make is thinking about it from a pure networking or pure IT perspective, but the danger here is all too real. With communications vendors often putting the emphasis on physical infrastructure, and software vendors almost dismissing the latter and focusing solely on applications, it is too easy to end up with an unbalanced and incomplete view because we have taken our lead from one camp or the other. Users are then deprived of either appropriate quality of service or appropriate

functionality, which makes business benefits difficult to realise and often means revisiting initial implementations and incurring the cost and disruption of putting things right.

So, if you want your UC implementation to deliver results quickly and sustainably, the best piece of advice is to make sure you have all the right people involved from the outset, including the comms guys, the IT guys, the business people and even HR. And from a supplier perspective, make sure your work with someone that has a rounded view of UC and the necessary range of skills and experience.

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