
How to ensure a smooth converged comms transition

It's all in the planning

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In a nutshell:

Converged communications promises to accelerate business processes and remove frustration and friction from communications, but businesses need to ensure that their approach is sound.

Key points:

- Converged communications is about bringing together disparate channels into a single communications environment
 - But only now is it really starting to gain a foothold in the enterprise environment, as enterprises adopt a more holistic view that goes beyond the technology to encompass the impact on working practices and processes within the business.
 - As enterprises transition to a converged environment, they need to take into account a set of core factors to ensure success. These include assessing ultimate organisational requirements from a converged environment, network capability, how suppliers will interface, and dealing with employee awareness.
 - This will ensure a smooth and successful transition that will bring about a number of benefits, including reduced costs, enhanced employee productivity and potentially providing enterprises with a competitive edge.
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Converged communications describes the process of bringing together numerous channels to create a single communications environment that is usually accessed via a screen and a keyboard.

Having been bandied about for many years, the concept of the converged enterprise is finally becoming a reality. In particular, the emphasis has shifted from a technology-oriented view of convergence, to a more holistic view, with the impact on working practices and processes within the business coming more to the fore.

There are clear benefits associated with convergence. Cost is an obvious one – using one infrastructure for voice, video and data services, for example, will lower total network operating costs. But benefits extend beyond such savings.

For example, employee productivity can be enhanced by making access to colleagues easier through such features as follow-me messaging. Additionally, converged communications can give

companies a more competitive edge. For example, it can enable companies to offer customers seamless, efficient and effective access to internal experts.

To ensure a smooth and successful transition towards a converged environment, businesses need to ensure that a core set of factors are taken into account:

- Ensure the organisational requirements from a converged environment are clearly laid out from the outset. This should take into account both the underlying infrastructure and the applications. While responsibility for implementation will reside with the IT department, the process must take into account the needs of the whole organisation, both at the inception of a converged environment, and on an ongoing basis. In defining these requirements, keep focused on the requirements of the business, and do not get distracted by clever, but superfluous, features.
- Verify that the network can handle the applications that will be run over it, and ensure quality of service and security are properly handled. Underestimating how much will be loaded onto the network can be disastrous in terms of remedial cost and disruption, and the impact on user confidence and acceptance. Thorough testing using network assessment tools is essential, as is having clearly defined plans in place in case of the network failing to deliver an acceptable quality of service.
- Put all potential suppliers through a thorough assessment process. Incumbent suppliers must be assessed to ensure they can deliver in the new environment, while new ones must likewise be checked to ensure they can make the grade. A converged communications environment will require solutions from a variety of sources. If a single point of contact is preferred, consider the channel - resellers, integrators, and so on. Will a telecoms provider be able to deliver, or is an IT services company the best route?
- Go for solutions based on open standards wherever possible, deviating only if there is a very good reason to do so. Enterprise communications is a dynamic environment and interoperability should be a core requirement.
- Ensure that employees throughout the organisation know how to work in the converged environment. The benefits around productivity, efficiency, and competitive advantage can only be realised if staff know how to use and exploit converged communications. And the only way to ensure this is through training. From an end-user perspective, anticipate and plan for a settling-in period, where a greater level of support will be required.
- It's fine to go slow. Enterprises should not take a big-bang approach to moving to a converged environment, but rather go for a gradual scale-up and scale-out operation. This gradual approach will allow weaknesses to be identified and rectified in a more controlled environment, as well as allowing best practice to be determined, as convergence is extended throughout the organisation.

Converged communications promises to accelerate business processes and remove frustration and friction from communications in general, and increase confidence levels. But it is essential that enterprises understand what they need from convergence, and what benefits it will bring in both systems and business terms.

Thorough internal assessments, based on needs rather than wants, together with an extensive review of available solutions and potential suppliers will provide a sound basis for informed decision making.

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