
Unified Communications in Context

By Dale Vile, August 2009

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We here at Freeform Dynamics have been tracking developments in the unified communications market for quite a while now. If we go back three years, it was still largely all about visions and theory, with very little activity in the mainstream in terms of real life adoption.

As time went on, we started to see activity as a result of traditional communications players such as Cisco, Avaya, Siemens, Nortel, NEC, etc up-selling from IP telephony requirements. Where this happened, however, customers often failed to capitalise on the true potential of unified communications from a value perspective, as initiatives had not been set in the appropriate business context with the necessary business and IT stakeholders involved. Indeed, one of the challenges has been how to articulate the problems, opportunities, principles and benefits associated with unified communications in a meaningful manner, which is why I wrote '[Joining the Dots of Business Communications](#)' a little while back, to at least provide some clarity around the basics.

As economic pressure has continued to impact IT and communications related investment decisions, the need for precision in terms of business context and rationale has become even more critical, especially as one of the most common objections to embracing unified communications is difficulty making the business case. While no one argues with the vision of removing the friction and disjoints in the way we communicate today by implementing a more seamless approach that cuts across telephony, conferencing, e-mail, instant messaging, and so on, many say they have more pressing demands on the finite funding and resources they have available to them.

One of the things that doesn't particularly help here is the generic way in which the unified communications proposition is often presented. Whether it's vendors or pundits, there is a tendency to discuss the area without distinguishing between the different scenarios in which the same (or similar) underlying technology can be applied. The reason this is significant is because it is only possible to get 'crunchy' about defining specific benefits and practicalities if you are precise about the kind of deployment you are considering.

When we get into discussions with those who are evaluating the relevance of unified communications to their business or trying to establish the best way forward, we find it very useful to run through some of the different types of initiative we see. At the highest level, this can be boiled down to three important categories that each map onto different drivers and stakeholders within the business:

General Comms and Collaboration

The business problem being tackled here is removal of the communications related fragmentation and disjoints associated with the activities of professional workers such as managers and executives, sales and marketing personnel, consultants and engineers, etc. While there are some important cost and productivity related benefits to be realised in this area, allowing professional workers to communicate more quickly, reliably, and in a richer manner enhances decision making, sales effectiveness, innovation and team working in general. Furthermore, facilities such as smart call routing, unified inboxes, etc, leads to improved organisational responsiveness to external parties, whether in a sales, partnering, supply chain, or service context. In many ways, this form of unified communications, including the mobile technology element, is best thought of as an enabler of any broader workforce collaboration initiative already in place or being considered.

Business Process Optimisation

Some vendors have started to talk about 'Communications Enabled Business Processes' (CEBP), which is essentially about implementing enhanced communication capability to streamline more structured activities within the business. The premise here is that the performance of many processes is directly dependent upon the efficiency with which individual contact and response takes place. This could be as simple as tracking down an appropriate individual and confirming their availability to deal with a job, incident or issue, and there are many examples of this across industries such as healthcare, manufacturing, utilities, telecoms, etc. It could also be more sophisticated, e.g. allowing key resources to be brought together automatically for troubleshooting or remedial purposes as a result of a systems-triggered event in a logistics, manufacturing or service management context, for example. The difference is that while communication is initiated by an individual on an ad hoc or discretionary basis in the general comms and collaboration scenario, with CEBP, it is kicked off in accordance with predefined rules as an embedded part of a structured process.

Enhanced Contact Centre

The use of unified communications can move the traditional call centre concept forward in a couple of different ways. Firstly, applying some of the same principles already discussed in relation to the first two categories of initiative, it is possible to extend customer service activity, for example, beyond the walls of the call centre to bring expertise residing in other departments or even in the field. The ease with which availability can be determined and calls routed in a device and location independent manner makes this possible. Taking this to the next level, unified communications enables the move to a more virtual approach, in which the need for centralised resources in a physical call centre is diminished, or even done away with all together. Some organisations are already taking advantage of this to incorporate home-based agents seamlessly into their customer service operations. Beyond the internal dimension, the same underlying unified communications technology can also be used as a foundation for enhancing communication with customers, allowing richer interaction across a range of different mechanisms to be offered without running into routing and efficiency issues.

These three flavours of unified communications initiatives illustrate that even at the highest level, the technologies and solutions we are talking about here can be applied in quite different ways. Some vendors, such as IBM and Avaya, have a good handle on this and can advise accordingly. Others still tend to focus on one type of deployment, e.g. Microsoft puts the emphasis on enhancing the communication and collaboration of 'information workers' (the first category above). As we said at the beginning, some are also still discussing unified communications in more of a generic way, and can find it hard to bridge the gap between the high level vision and specific business benefits that can be assessed objectively.

Of course there are also the differences in implementation requirements to consider. It is beyond the scope of this article to go into detail here, but suffice it to say that interoperability with existing telephony, email and desktop productivity solutions is key for general comms and collaboration; integration, e.g. via the SOA model, with both bespoke and packaged applications will be required for CEBP, and the ability to work with CRM and other call centre technology is key in the contact centre scenario.

Having said all this, I do still have some sympathy with those who discuss unified communications as just 'one thing', as this viewpoint does have some merit if you put the business context to one side and focus purely on the architectural perspective. It could be argued, for example, that wherever you start in terms of type of deployment, if you implement the technology in the appropriate manner, you will be laying the infrastructural foundations to deal with subsequent requirements in other areas down the line.

The trouble is that this doesn't help with initial scoping, understanding and justification when each type of solution falls within the domain of different budget structures and business sponsors. The CIO and their team are therefore going to be in that familiar situation of trying to balance longer term infrastructure development interests at an overall enterprise level with the immediate business needs that are used as the foundation for justifying and funding the initial project.

The one thing for certain, though, is that trying to secure business buy-in to the high level unified communications vision and proposition for the organisation as a whole is not going to be that easy in the current climate. Getting specific in the way we have described is therefore key to getting things moving and starting to take the organisation forward in the right direction.

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