



UNIFIED COMMUNICATIONS COMES OF AGE

*Three years ago **iStart** prophesied that unified communications was going to be the next big thing. But three years, in the days before BYOD and when the cloud was in its infancy, is a long time ago.*

*So where are we now? What is the business case for UC and what's the best way to turn it to competitive advantage? Where is return on investment and has the technology finally caught up with the promise? **Jonathan Cotton** investigates..*

Gone are the days when unified communications solutions offered little more than instant messaging for workers or point-and-click dialling for contact centres. These days, UC promises enterprises a holy trinity of productivity benefits, streamlined communications and accelerated business processes.

Advanced conferencing capabilities, presence technology, and highly sophisticated internal networking technologies are rapidly becoming part of the everyday tech landscape, with over 85 per cent of Fortune 500 companies having now deployed some kind of unified communications solution. UC is now considered a 'must-have' solution for businesses looking to improve their productivity and bottom line.

And the technology has most certainly come of age. With a well-implemented UC solution, companies can now communicate across numerous branches, internally and externally, and over vast distances as though meeting face-to-face. Easily accessible desktop sharing and video conferencing is boosting productivity, vastly improved presence and messaging functionality is removing needless latency, and the potential for remote workers to improve bottom lines, thanks to faster response times and improved collaboration, is revolutionising the way employers think about the office.

So is the ROI keeping up?

The return on investment, however, is difficult to assess at first glance, as soft returns, such as presence management, instant messaging (IM) and softphone applications, compliment the more concrete benefits of reduced VOIP calling costs, less travel and eliminating third party conferencing costs.

"When you're talking about the return on investment for unified communications it is quite a hard thing to quantify," says Jan Kok, principal architect of networked ICT products, Gen-i.

"There are certainly some very specific 'hard' ROIs, such as conferencing costs. You can straight way say 'I'm not going to dial an audio conference provider and pay a permanent price, I'm going to host that internally on my UC platform, and you can really put a dollar value on that.

"But when we talk about presence and IM, they're very soft ROIs. For example, spending two days leaving voice mails and trying to find the right decision maker and not getting that,

“Mobility's all well and good if you've got Wi-Fi everywhere. But we're not there yet.”

Colin Steeples, *general manager, Amtel*

speeding up workflow process because you're finding the right person first, those are very real benefits, but trickier to measure.”

An easier benefit to gauge however is the new breed of UC collaboration solutions - technologies that allow companies to connect to a central platform, view a shared item, and collaborate on that item in real time - creating highly productive and cooperative work sessions.

"UC is not just about conferencing anymore," says Kok. "It's about being able to collaborate and share documents, being able to have geographically separate teams edit a single spreadsheet for example. In the past a company would have one PBX infrastructure for New Zealand and a separate infrastructure in Australia and they would never be connected. Now, those are becoming more integrated. You can now reach out to someone on the other side of the world in the same way as you'd reach to some at another local branch. You simply don't have to be in the same room anymore.”

According to the Forrsights Workforce Employee Survey, Q1 2011, 57 per cent of North American and European information workers interact with at least 11 other employees at their company as part of their day-to-day job. One of UC's most obvious benefits is in maximising the efficiency of these every-day interactions.

"Believe it or not," says MyNetFone CEO Rene Sugo, "the most popular feature is always voice mail to email. Hands down, every quarter that always comes up as the number one thing users like about our system.

"But it makes sense. If you miss a call using a traditional mobile provider, you get an instant message on your phone telling you you've got a voice mail and that's all it tells you. It





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doesn't tell you who the caller is, you don't know what it's about. But by having [that message] in your inbox, you get the caller ID, you can see who it is on screen, then you can click it, pause it and rewind it. You don't have to worry if you don't have a pen because it's saved in your inbox, so you don't have to worry about deleting it. You can save it, file it, archive it, forward it on to someone to action, and it's done. That convenience pays off.”

And with workforces that are increasingly distributed, virtual and mobile, leveraging communications technology to mobile devices, slates and tablets across 3G and wireless networks means increased productivity, efficiency and availability of employees.

“We're now starting to roll out voice, video and collaboration to mobile devices,” says Kok. “With your iPad, or Microsoft Surface, you can sit there and run a video conference and see content and be able to talk. That's just starting to push across 3G and 4G Wi-Fi networks. It's amazing.”

Such a single, unified, mobile-friendly communication solution is contingent, of course, on network capabilities, and as

such, is still in its infant stages.

“Mobility's all well and good,” says Amtel general manager, Colin Steeples, “if you've got Wi-Fi everywhere. But we're not there yet.”

Wi-Fi access is changing though according to Stephen Philip of Aerohive Networks. “Wi-Fi in a corporate setting is becoming increasingly ubiquitous, because it needs to be to support the plethora of Wi-Fi enabled devices. The iPhone just exploded it, and UC is adding to the pressure on network managers.” [As it happens, Philip has just the solution, but it doesn't fit the UC beat here, so he's given us a full case study on Aerohive's networked Wi-Fi set up at BCS - refer page 66.]

Rethinking the office

These days of course not all out-of-office workers are mobile workers.

With the number of outsourced home agents expected to double by 2015, presence and softphone technology is playing a key part in the work-from-home employee movement, providing the twin benefits of increased productivity and lowered overheads.

“We have a client who runs an online gift shop service, where you can order flowers or gifts online,” says Sugo. “His six or eight staff all work from their respective homes with a PC and a MyNetFone phone. He doesn't have an office. He has a local number and the calls come into our cloud.

“His peak times are Valentines' Day and Mother's Day and he never misses a call. If all his agents are busy he gets voice mails automatically and the voice mails simply go to email, so as soon as the agents get off the phone they can see the email backing up with voice mails.

“He says that last Mother's Day was the biggest day he ever had and he didn't lose a single order. His solution means that even though they don't have an office, they still work as a team.”

The unified communication application that's topping many companies' 'must-have' list is 'federation', which allows enterprises to connect with people outside their business as easily as those within. Companies with a UC infrastructure can 'federate' with another business with a UC infrastructure, sharing their UC tools as trusted partners.

Several instant messaging UC platforms support federation, with Microsoft considered by many to be the leader.

“Using your Lync infrastructure, you can communicate with

your vendor partners who have taken the time to federate with you," Jaimie Robson, director, DeployTech. "It's easy. You simply pop open your Lync client and send someone an instant message. It's instantaneous."

Users from one organization can reach those within another federated organization via IM, click to call, video, web conferencing or desktop sharing, at the click of a button. IM, presence, voice and video federation also work between Lync and any of the 400 million Windows Messenger users. And because Lync feeds back through Microsoft Outlook, voice and chat sessions are recorded, offering the perfect catch-all for those businesses with a significant interest in compliance.

"From a compliance perspective and general data management," says Robson, "you can actually replace your traditional PBXs, your voice mail solutions, everything, with Microsoft Lync, soft phones, physical phones where required, and conferencing cameras".

So does this mean that traditional PBX systems are increasingly seen as a thing of the past? Absolutely, says Jan Kok.

"UC, two or three years ago, was something that worked beside of, or on top of, a PBX. Not today. Today we're pulling PBX systems out completely and putting in UC platforms like Lync and Cisco. The time when people are piloting and trialling it is gone. They're now really getting into it.

"A year or two ago it was all about conferencing, now it's all about PBX replacements. We're seeing UC platforms taking the place of the traditional PBX platforms, because clients put it in for voice, but then get all the other incremental benefits as well."

Making the jump

Set-up costs vary of course, depending on the size of the workforce, what existing infrastructure is present, and whether an open system or all-in-one solution from a single manufacturer is implemented.

So what's the best way forward for an average company looking to make the leap?

"A good time to do this is when you're going through your Windows 7 upgrades," says Robson. "It's all about minimising disruption. You've just got to make sure that the back-end infrastructure is going to support it. If you've got Exchange [Server] 2003 on a small business tablet it's not going to work how you think it's going to work, so you've got to work out those details beforehand."

Leveraging existing equipment via UC as-a-service reduces >>

Five ways UC can improve productivity in your business

1. By eliminating 'phone tag'.

Through real-time presence reporting, UC lets you know where a colleague is, what they're working on, and whether they're available to take a call.

If they're busy or in a meeting, UC can estimate when they'll be available and notify you the instant they are.

Not only does this eliminate 'phone tag', it also improves productivity across the board by letting everyone in the business to work smarter and more efficiently.

2. By allowing 'best-method' communication.

UC similarly enables everyone in the business to choose the most appropriate communications method at any time.

Taking into account either a contact's status, current activity or geographic location, communicators can choose to call, voice-mail, video conference, email or instant message – whatever the most productive medium is at the time.

3. By integrating your handset with Outlook.

The best UC systems integrate the handset on the user's desk with Microsoft Outlook.

This allows you to quickly make or redirect calls by clicking on a contact, removing the need to remember numbers, extensions or the correct combination of buttons for forwarding a call.

4. By allowing you to control incoming communications.

UC allows you to decide how and when you'll be contacted. If you need to go uninterrupted, a simple click will divert all calls to voice mail.

UC systems also provide everyone in the business with a single phone number, able to reach them both at their desk or on their mobile.

5. By empowering your receptionist.

One person likely to experience a large productivity boost from UC is your receptionist. A typical estimate of time-saved answering and directing calls via UC is around 50%.

You'll also improve your businesses' responsiveness and customer service by allowing your receptionist to check that a contact is ready to receive a call before putting your customer on hold – easily redirecting the caller to another contact if they are not.

Robert Chau is Telephony Practice Manager, Brennan IT



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Rene Sugo, CEO, *MyNetFone*

upfront costs and eases deployment. A quick return on investment, rapid deployment times, flexibility and a pay-as-you-go model delivered via the web, can be a very attractive option to business looking to keep costs down.

“If you go with a premise-based solution, generally your IT provider will come out, look at your requirements and they’ll do everything for you, and you will pay for the privilege” says Sugo. “If you go with a cloud-based provider however, for a soft-phone option, the set-up costs are very minimal.”

“As with most technology, as it evolves and matures it gets simpler and simpler, to where do-it-yourself is a realistic option. And let’s face it, if you’re a small business saving money is one of the most important things.”

As with any cloud-delivered solution though, questions over integration, security concerns, impact on application performance and complex pricing models persist.

“Many have concerns over security, including fear about putting company data into the hands of a third party,” says tech commentator Becky Boyd. “Other concerns about application performance and availability, also deter adoption.”

“IT and business executives want to ensure that their corporate data is protected and that privacy policies are properly

enforced. They also want to be sure they can regain control of their data if they are unhappy with their SaaS provider, or if their SaaS vendor goes out of business or their services are seriously disrupted.”

Vendors however, have robust security technology - including encryption where appropriate, refined user access control - well beyond what most businesses can afford themselves.

“These security measures far exceed what most small- and mid-size enterprises can put into place,” says Boyd. “They also go beyond the safeguards of many large-scale enterprises by, among other things, providing integrated auditing capabilities. And, the off-site hosting brings built-in disaster recovery and business continuity benefits.”

The future

Leveraging a robust UC platform in new ways can create efficiencies in other areas of enterprise and offer returns from unexpected quarters. UC-empowered “Communications Enabled Business Processes” (CEBP) is the hot new method of automating processes to increase efficiency.

“One of the big things you’re going to see in the software industry in the coming years, that offers the highest return on investment, is based around workflow,” says Steeples. “There is so much inefficiency in business that there are huge wins to be had around process automation.”

Essentially, CEBP leverages existing unified communications technologies to reduce the human latency that slows down business processes.

“Communications Enabled Business Processes takes the call centre technology that knows about people’s presence and knows about people’s skills,” explains Steeples. “It takes that incoming call and says ‘this number requires this kind of skill’. Or perhaps the customer has entered something in an IVR or someone who’s completed an application on a website or sent an email, it takes that interaction and routes it to someone who is available to deal with it.”

By embedding the unified communications solution into the business process workflow itself, those processes are accelerated and simplified. By seeking out the processes that currently have high amounts of delay due to human intervention (or lack of intervention) those areas can be automated with CEBP and, importantly, the efficiency gains measured.

“We are pushing that work to people. We’re saying ‘you’re not just a call centre agent getting phone calls, now you’re a call centre agent who’s been assigned work items, which form a work flow. We are now routing that work to employees who can deal with it, and it’s all based on the presence information we already have.”