

# BUSINESS COMMUNIC GETS PUMPED

Unified communications technologies give employees the tools they need to conference and collaborate more effectively.



Decentralization, outsourcing, mobile workforces and telework have made traditional switchboards decidedly passé. In their place, unified communications (UC) systems are providing connectivity among employees — regardless of whether they're in the office or away.

# ATION

In the UC environment, all communication tools — from voice, data, video conferencing (VC) and instant messaging (IM) through e-mail and text messaging — are fully integrated in real time. UC allows companies to access data on demand and collaborate with virtual teams anywhere in the world.

To improve business outcomes while reducing costs and encouraging environmental sustainability, UC integrates various communication applications. These include:

- Telephony
- Conferencing and collaboration
- Messaging
- Call center solutions

While all important, new software-based conferencing and collaboration solutions for audio and web conferencing, face-to-face conferencing via video and other collaboration tools are allowing companies to report achieving measurable improvements in corporate performance. These include increased efficiencies, total cost savings and environmental carbon footprint reductions.

## A Process, Not a Product

It's possible to speak of a company's UC system to describe the equipment and software implemented to facilitate communications and collaboration. However, unified communications is really less about a thing and more about a strategy, says Jayanth Angl, senior research analyst of Info-Tech Research Group.

"Unified communications is not a product; it's an integrated approach to managing collaboration," he says. According to the experts, it can be boiled down to three things:

1. Enhancing the end-user experience by integrating the different tools and making it clear when staffers should or could use them
2. Streamlining daily communication
3. Accelerating business processes by more tightly integrating communications with core applications

Many small businesses have already implemented some of the building blocks of UC. These include Voice over IP (VoIP), video and web conferencing and instant messaging. However, there is often no way to move easily from one tool to another when a situation calls for a richer communication environment.

In a UC system, a conversation that starts as a text-based IM session can easily and seamlessly be escalated to a web conference to share a display or demonstrate a program. And then, if need be, users can easily shift gears and launch a full-room video-conference session or a conference call to change the dynamic or bring in more participants to provide specific expertise.

By integrating both the methods of communication and the interfaces through which employees access them, unified communications aims to be transparent to



## Planning a Unification Strategy

With so many technologies falling under the umbrella of unified communications, it can be difficult to determine the best option for a company. Senior research analyst of Info-Tech Research Group, Jayath Angl, offers this advice for small businesses looking at implementing a UC strategy:

- **Address a real business issue.** There are technologies that promise the world, but they will just gather dust (and tie up resources) if no one in the company has a reason to use them.
- **Build a partnership between the IT and business sides of the company.** Both will have different and equally important perspectives on pain points and bottlenecks that impact communications in the business.
- **Speak with end users about their experiences and desires.** They're the ones doing the actual communicating in the business, so what affects them affects the bottom line.
- **Develop specific cases for each technology.** For example, a room-based video conferencing system won't be much use with a widely distributed workforce that rarely meets together in one place.
- **Focus on outcomes, not financials.** Obviously, the economic impact of any technology is important, but a lot of the return on investment for UC will be in soft dollars, productivity gains achieved throughout the enterprise such as time not spent trying to connect with unavailable co-workers.

Every step down the UC path, Angl advises, should be guided by the question, "How can this technology help meet core business issues?"

the end user. That way, for instance, each user can focus on his or her work rather than worry about the pass code for the department's web conferencing application.

### Presence Potential

UC is sometimes described as reaching out to the right person, at the right time, with the right tools. More succinctly, "UC is about bringing the right tools to employees to make them more productive," adds Jeff Ridley, ShoreTel's director of product management.

A truly collaboration-changing ability made possible by integrating communication tools is presence. Offering availability status and communication capabilities, this functionality transmits information about what a specific worker is doing and how he or she can best be contacted.

"Presence is the touchpoint where all these technologies come together," says Bill Pray, senior analyst for the technology research and analyst firm Gartner. "It creates that situational awareness that is at the core of letting end users know the best way to communicate with others, the best channel to use and to control interruptions through their own presence."

Businesses benefit greatly from integrating communication tools into core business processes such as sales, customer service, working with clients, training and so on. "Unified communications ties communication into daily workflow in ways that allow staff to be more productive," says Tim Yankey, senior director of product marketing for Polycom.

"This could be something like tying a telephony system or a video conferencing system into a customer relationship management system," he says. The upside is "getting alerted when one of the company's customers is calling in. Or when employees need to follow up with a contact, they can simply click to call."

When organizations tie communication tools into business processes, it streamlines the workload and makes staff more productive. They can "provide better customer service, make faster decisions and save on operating costs," Yankey adds.

### Conferencing and Collaboration

Organizations of all sizes are looking for ways to streamline processes, eliminate

redundancies and cut costs. UC conferencing and collaboration solutions remove physical barriers by providing users with a more effective and productive means of interacting with each other, partners and customers.

Conferencing and collaboration applications in a UC environment provide a more effective and productive means of interacting with others. The new infrastructure opens up a whole new world of productivity, particularly when it comes to audio, web and video conferencing.

**Audio Conferencing:** Of the three conferencing technologies, audio conferencing is the most basic way of enabling staff to conduct meetings more conveniently and efficiently. It offers one of the easiest ways to communicate with three or more participants, in different locations, at the same time.

On the plus side, audio conferencing is the easiest of the conferencing solutions for IT to roll out and for end users to use. On the downside, the lack of a visual component — whether video or desktop presentation — makes it difficult to work with documents. Often depending upon the amount of use, audio conferencing can be set up as a hosted or premised-based solution.

**Web Conferencing:** A step up from audio conferencing is web conferencing. This solution is designed to conduct presentations or meetings over the web, also known as webinars. Participants typically sit at their own computers and are connected with other participants. Web conferences can include various multimedia components, including audio, document sharing and IM connectivity.

The real-time information sharing component of web conferencing is its major advantage over audio conferencing. But that extra planning is also a disadvantage of conducting a web conference. For tutorial-type sessions, rehearsal time is critical for the moderator to make an effective presentation. Like audio conferencing, web conferencing can be set up as a hosted or premised-based solution.

**Video Conferencing:** This type of conferencing provides organizations with the most powerful means of communication. Whether it's a desktop video chat through a webcam, a presentation in a multisite meeting room with enhanced displays, cameras

or microphones, or a high-level board meeting conducted with a dedicated telepresence system, video conferencing can help organizations improve productivity, extend a company's reach, reduce travel expenses, shorten sales cycles and enhance working relationships.

Historically, the three types of conferencing have been deployed in separate infrastructure silos. Users had to decide in advance which conferencing method (or combination of methods) to use.

The user interfaces were different and confusing for each method, and they usually required separate access IDs and passwords. Also complicating matters, separate, often specialized, equipment was needed for video conferencing. This environment restricted the use of the most appropriate format and also added significant staff and administration cost.

Unified communications has effectively eliminated this siloed approach. Depending on a company's needs, each of these conferencing solutions can be employed to great advantage over a UC network.

Companies can and often do implement each of these services separately. By themselves, they do not create unified communications. What ties a UC system together is the underlying platform through which all these services become accessible via a company's shared directory.

That integration supports the ability to take a conversation between two people and escalate to a room-to-room video conference. The beauty of UC is that the opposite scalability also exists; a pair of participants can take the meeting offline without actually having to go offline.

"Once a firm gets to one unified structure and has a single directory and multiple contact points off that directory, it takes people less time to find the right people to talk to and the right way to talk to them," says Michael Helmbrecht, vice president of product marketing for LifeSize Communications.

## Unified Benefits

At its most elemental, UC can help a business streamline operations. As such, it offers both direct and indirect payoffs throughout the organization.

"UC offers a myriad of little things that enhance productivity," Polycom's Yankey says.

Discover CDW solutions to better communicate and collaborate with employees, partners and customers.

"When you add them together, they make a huge difference for the small business."

Whether it's getting an answer for a customer, obtaining final approval to release a document or accessing information needed to move a project forward, speeding the communication process means each employee can complete more transactions in a shorter time span. That can provide incremental productivity and profitability.

Another clear UC benefit, especially when deploying teleconferencing, screen-sharing and video conferencing tools, is its ability to reduce the need for business travel. These technologies fill a gap that has long existed between person-to-person phone conversations and in-person meetings.

Although, for some purposes, nothing can replace a face-to-face get-together; if a company can save even a few expensive business trips a year, it can chalk up significant savings. Plus, in an environmentally conscious world, fewer business trips add up to a greener footprint (another bonus for corporate reputation).

The effectiveness of UC technologies also help on the creative side. By allowing a dispersed team to conference and collaborate effectively while maintaining a personal touch, they can assist in enhancing the quality of the creative product.

"When you can take 'show me' and turn it into an instant close versus a process that involves buying a ticket, getting on an airplane and traveling to see somebody, you accelerate your throughput through the organization," ShoreTel's Ridley says.

## Business Processes

A lot of the benefits of unified communications are seemingly intangible — things

that are hard to attach a dollar value or metric to. However, more quantifiable benefits begin to emerge when communications become integrated in business processes.

"You're taking business processes and workflows and you're creating efficiencies in them," Gartner's Pray says. "Through those processes and workflows, you can begin to measure a kind of efficiency that can equate to real dollar value and competitive differentiation. If you can do it better and faster than the competition, you have a leg up on them."

Currently, one of the most common communications-enabled business applications is customer relationship management applications. However, tools are emerging that allow leveraging UC technologies to enable greater collaboration.

"For example, we're starting to see web conferencing being integrated into different business application environments," Pray adds. "Therefore, it's very quick and easy to start a conference from within those environments."

IT manufacturers have begun to create these kinds of hooks in their products, so that users can swiftly jump from one communications technology to another. The focus is on integrating tools in ways that help employees speed business processes or improve workflow.

Take, for example, Plantronics Savi Office WO100 wireless headset system built to unify voice communications. With the touch of a button, users can connect to a softphone call, a desk phone call or attend a webinar.

## Conferencing and Collaboration Bonus

Companies that use conferencing and collaboration tools report achieving measurable improvements in their corporate performance. This includes increased business efficiencies, total cost savings and environmental carbon footprint reductions through reduced travel.

By integrating conferencing and collaboration tools into a unified communications system — via web, audio and video technologies — small businesses can achieve instant access to people, documents and resources, regardless of location. It also allows staffers to manage these interactions in real time — as if they were in all places at once. ■