

Unified communications

A hot item, but what is it?

Unified communications (UC) is one of the hottest discussions in the communications world today. It means different things to different people and is defined by different vendors to suit their offerings and target market. Many use it synonymously with unified messaging, which it's not. It's more expansive than that, says Margi Shaw, Chief Operations Officer of CIMCO Communications.

The research organization Frost & Sullivan defines unified communications as follows: "Unified communications is the evolution of telephone, e-mail and instant messaging functionality into a single service or application. This is not an evolution of technology but an evolution in the way workers and companies deploy and use their communications services."

Because it is an evolutionary approach, the definition will continue to be vague or change in its specificity.

Smart Business spoke with Shaw to get a better understanding of which product suites, technologies and applications fall under the UC umbrella and the overall impact of UC on the workplace.

Are businesses required to develop a UC solution all at once, or can it be implemented in phases?

There appears to be no clear view of the future, so taking a building block approach is the one viewed as a more desirable and prudent strategy. Premise-based or hosted voice services form the building blocks of a UC solution, where additional applications can be integrated down the road. Industry research tells us that 80 percent of businesses are using some type of UC solution, and it usually starts with VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol).

In our experience, we have found that many companies are not convinced of the new UC applications. Most are sticking with their existing IP PBXs and layering UC applications on top, which means they are undertaking phased approaches.



Margi Shaw
Chief Operations Officer
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What are the benefits and advantages of going to UC? How can we determine which solution is best for us?

The world is moving toward a complete UC solution, despite the fact we really don't know what that will look like in five and 10 years. It is simply an evolution that you will be forced to participate in, so the best approach is to develop a strategic plan with an expert, most likely your voice and data services provider. Most businesses incorporate some kind of UC application for enhanced productivity purposes, particularly as business becomes more virtual and mobile.

Integration required for the UC environment is a complex process. Components typically sitting in the LAN (instant messaging and e-mail) are integrated with network-based mobility, WAN and converged IP-PBX. Latency is still a critical problem for real-time traffic, which refers to both interactive telephone calls (PSTN or VoIP) and instant messaging. In fact, many see real-time communications as the key differentiator between UC and IM, which is a store and forward technology.

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What about the human factor of a unified communications world?

We feel, as do many in the industry, that unified communications will transform the workplace and social routines throughout the world. Most discussion around UC is about the technology, but another real issue that should be addressed is the human factor. While unified communications will make employees more productive, it can also be seen as a major contributor to work-related stress as workers continually feel they are on call.

With the plethora of tools such as laptops, PDAs, cell phones, e-mail and pagers, there is an ever-widening gap between the amount of information people are expected to keep up with and the amount they can reasonably process. Basically, what it comes down to is that technology is outpacing our ability to use it, and companies need to be realistic about how much technology is too much for their employees to manage.

Will this contribute to employees feeling as though they are working 24/7?

As indicated, companies need to recognize that employees must set boundaries for work-life balance. Those boundaries are different than the traditional ones in the past, with technology that connects employees to their jobs 24/7 and a global economy where employees are accommodating different time zones.

New technology can either overwhelm employees, or can be used to improve productivity without working against the employees and company culture. It's important to recognize that any new technology in the workplace creates many changes in how information is received, in business processes and in training employees properly to efficiently use it. Change management, change communications and user training are also important to incorporate in the planning of such a major technology change. <<