

# A pragmatic approach to Unified Communications

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Unified Communications (UC), properly done, is a series of simple steps, which create a more cost-efficient and customer-oriented way to manage the end-to-end communications life cycle throughout an enterprise. UC aims to provide a seamless, end-to-end way of communicating and working. By bringing together such services as fixed and mobile voice and data, web conferencing, voicemail, email and business processes, it cuts costs and improves the ability of the business to react quickly to changes in client and market demand.



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There is much talk about Unified Communications today, yet there is little common agreement as to its precise definition, or even why businesses should find it so attractive. Too often, those who have a proprietary interest in promoting a particular product or solution sell it from a technological perspective.

Unified Communications is not a magic wand that will cure all corporate ills. Rather, it is a series of simple steps, which create a more cost-efficient and customer-oriented way of managing the end-to-end communications life cycle throughout an enterprise.

Organisations, then, need to adopt a practical, business-focused approach when considering the benefits that converged

communications offer. Accordingly, the first step is verifying how well current fixed and mobile voice and data expenditure serves the broader enterprise and its objectives.

Unless this is done initially, it becomes much harder to identify the commercial, service and technology aspects of the right solution and then deliver these to meet the business's overall goals.

### Towards greater mobility

Unified Communications is a set of solutions designed to provide a seamless, end-to-end way of communicating and working. By bringing together such services as fixed and mobile voice and data, web-conferencing, voicemail, email and business processes, it seeks to provide the

ideal end-user experience - at the same time cutting costs and improving the ability of the business to react quickly to changes in client and market demand.

Technologies already exist to make this happen. Yet, to be truly effective, the choice of a solution must take into account a number of changes in how communications is viewed and used within the enterprise.

First, communications is no longer seen simply as a hard-to-control cost centre, but more and more as a strategic asset that drives productivity and customer satisfaction. Today, business considerations are no longer the sole determinant of the corporate approach to communications. Corporations are now likely to also consider how employees use different

devices in a domestic or social networking environment. In this context, the corporate communications strategy will then seek to support or replicate these personal usage habits within the business itself - this is often called the 'consumerisation' of corporate communications.

Finally, Universal Communications is possible without the enterprise having to invest heavily in new technology. As the budgetary emphasis switches from capital to operational expenditure, the increasing availability of cloud-based options means that the business can enjoy the benefits of greater collaboration more quickly and cost-effectively. Equally importantly, this is achievable without having to undergo disruptive infrastructure change.

### Benefits for all

Mobility is a key driver of change, as businesses look for greater agility in responding quickly to the demands of their various stakeholders. Internally, a new generation of employees is looking to improve their work/life balance, seeing work no longer as 'a place where you go' but rather 'an activity that you do'. As a result, they need to be equally effective and productive irrespective of location.

As products become increasingly commoditised and the pace of commercial change increases, the ability to react fast to customer and market needs has become more important and organisations are looking to create competitive advantages by differentiating themselves.

In response, mobility now sits at the centre of enterprise communications schemes and Unified Communications' strategy, with the smartphone and mobile email, for example, becoming the communications tools of choice for a more flexible workforce.

The reason for this is clear: Unified Communications is increasingly recognised as key to delivering a better end-user experience while, at the same time, reducing internal costs by rationalising the communications infrastructure.

### First steps to change

A snapshot of today indicates that many businesses are at the start of their journey towards implementing a full Unified Communications' strategy, by converging existing mobile and fixed voice and data services. At the outset of any Unified Communications' project, it is critically

important to develop an understanding of how their communications budget is currently spent. Traditionally, few companies have had a clear notion of how effectively their spending on communications has promoted their operational efficiency.

There are three key steps to implementing an effective Unified Communications' strategy when working with a third party communications provider. First, to effectively analyse and optimise existing telephony expenditures, it is important to look at technologies that provide centralised visibility and control.

Having established where the business is today, the next step is to identify the desired 'end game', exploring what an ideal communications infrastructure will look like as a core element within the enterprise's long-term business development strategy.

Finally, step three is to identify the most appropriate roadmap to achieving a successful transition. Critically, this is unlikely to involve 'big bang' step change.

This implementation of Unified Communications calls for practical, iterative, planning that incorporates proof of concept testing and controlled rollout at each stage. This helps those involved learn how to best integrate the systems into daily operations and builds the confidence needed to move the new communications capabilities to centre-stage within the enterprise.

### Choosing a communications partner

Given the rapid, continuing advances in mobility it is essential to work with a partner that is technology agnostic, and not tied to a proprietary set of solutions, to maximise the choices and identify a best-fit response.

Surveys regularly highlight a number of key benefits that enterprises seek when planning to outsource their needs using a managed communications services provider. They typically look for realistic cost benefits, improved operational performance in light of reduced headcount, a fully scalable solution, and effective programme management across the complete range of customer requirements in all geographies.

Underpinning this, perhaps the most difficult benefit to quantify - but the one most often cited by customers looking to change provider - is 'ease of doing business' - finding a provider who understands and

is sympathetic to the goals and challenges facing the organisation.

Historically, it has proved especially hard to create a business case around investment in communications and collaboration. However, so far, we have seen performance improvements of around 30 per cent in such diverse areas as productivity, travel costs, customer service, staff access to information, collaboration and total cost of ownership.

### Broad vision

In light of this, a practical plan to succeed with Unified Communications should include a number of elements. It should not focus on technology, but rather on the user experience - people must like the service. Convergence is not just another buzzword, but is also a way of working, so the business must move away from siloed thinking that concentrates solely upon the methods of delivery - such as video, audio or mobile - utilised.

Finally, Unified Communications is no longer just about internal benefits; the new paradigm focuses upon bringing these technologies to the customer, thereby enabling businesses to open up new sales and distribution channels.

In short, properly implemented, Unified Communications will be good for the business, its people, its customers and the environment. Unified Communications might not be a 'silver bullet', but it certainly can help move communications from cost centre to one of central importance in driving the enterprise forward. ●