Straight Talking – The dawn of unified communications – March 2009

By Bob Tarzey, Analyst and Director, Quocirca Ltd

As politicians quibble about whether a recession is turning into a depression, businesses are more focused on the bottom line. For IT departments this means two things: cutting their own costs and helping the broader business to cut its costs. Achieving the latter will serve the long term reputation of IT well.

This has led to a renewed focus from vendors on unified communications (UC) - also known as IP convergence, unified messaging and a host of similar terms.

Definitions of UC vary depending on who you talk to but broadly speaking it involves the pulling together of traditional IP-based communications such as email, IM and web conferencing with voice communications (both fixed line and mobile), video conferencing and a plethora of communication tools that have arisen under the web 2.0 banner.

The purported cost savings from UC come from reduced cost of voice calls (internal calls are essentially free), lower cost infrastructure that is easier to manage (just one network for voice and data) and more efficient communications between employees and outsiders who are better able to find each other through presence capabilities that indicate if someone is available and how best to contact them.

There is nothing new about this. The idea of converging voice and data communications has been around for years and some businesses are well down the road to adopting it. However, others are held back by internal politics, as voice communications are often run by a separate department from IT. Add to this scepticism grounded in the historic inability of IT departments to deliver high performance and reliability, and there is understandable concern about putting all the networking eggs in one IT basket.

However, if these issues can be overcome, it is the IT department that will deploy UC. It will run over its data network, make use of the processing power of much of its existing hardware and will involve software integration, an area where IT teams have plenty of experience.

The starting point for UC is the underlying platform - to date this has usually been a replacement PBX (private branch exchange) that supports IP but there are now alternative approaches.

Traditional telephony vendors all now have IP PBXs that link to internal IP networks and interface with external PSTNs. These include Avaya's Unified Communications range and the Alcatel-Lucent's Converged Telephony Server, which given their background, tend to be strong on the voice side and weaker when it comes to IP applications.

Cisco, ever keen to drive more traffic across the IP networks it has had so much success in selling, has also created its own UC division. Its Call Manager range of products do a good job of bridging the gap between old-style and new-style telephony, but Cisco is also keen to sell as many of its flashy, if expensive IP phones as possible, which the buyer may not need.

Microsoft has been making inroads into the UC market with its Office Communications Server (OCS), which effectively combines email, voice and other traffic and presents it to the user through a unified interface: Microsoft Communicator. There have been doubts about its scalability but some resellers believe the latest release, OCS 2007 R2, is as good as any IP PBX.

Mobile service providers want a look-in too. Some advocate extending their own networks into that of their customers' premises using femtocells. In this scenario everyone uses a mobile telephony handset for voice calls, both internal and external. However, in most cases mobile telephony still co-exists with other forms of telephony and integration is more likely using dual mode handsets.

The drive to UC has also thrown up some pure play vendors, for example, ShoreTel. Its products have been built for the UC age and are designed to replace and/or integrate with existing telephony systems, mobile providers and IP networks.

Once a platform for UC is in place the rationalisation of end-user devices can start. It is hard to justify installing an IP phone on every desktop when many already have enough excess processing power on their PCs to run softphones - and all that is needed is a cheap USB headset. For users whose work involves some degree of mobility, the range devices provide may need some rationalisation to keep service and management costs down.

Finally, if all that is not enough choice, there is a final option which is about to take off big time - UC on-demand. This involves no internal communications platform at all; services are instead delivered via the internet from a centrally managed location that allows even small businesses to benefit from enterprise class infrastructure.

Microsoft is likely to be a big player in this area with its Business Productivity Online Suite (BPOS) initiative, a package for email, web conferencing and internal voice delivered on-demand. Microsoft is building its own BPOS infrastructure and encouraging partners to do the same.

Others may look to join Redmond in the on-demand space. Cisco may look to extend the range of services offered via its WebEx web conferencing platform that it acquired in 2007 - a widely used on-demand service. And Google is adding more and more capability to its applications portfolio, and has recently unveiled a preview of voice app Google Voice.

Service providers including BT and Global Crossing are building their own offerings, as are some smaller organisations - for example ThinkGrid, a UK-based service provider that has built a platform for on-demand delivery that includes many of the components of UC. It uses a range of what it considers to be best-of-breed technology from a number of vendors.

ThinkGrid's approach underlines a reality. UC will usually be a heterogeneous deployment - a different set-up from business to business, depending on what tech already exists and where the company wants to go. It will not be an overnight rip and replace of one set of technologies with another, but a migration over time.

The move to UC is a journey and the cost of embarking on it will determine if it is one to be started in a recession - but it is one that all businesses will make at some point.

About Quocirca

Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

Quocirca works with global and local providers of ITC products and services to help them deliver on the promise that ITC holds for business. Quocirca's clients include Oracle, Microsoft, IBM, O2, T-Mobile, HP, Xerox, EMC, Symantec and Cisco, along with other large and medium sized vendors, service providers and more specialist firms.

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