

ITAnalysis - Fixed Mobile Unified Communications (FMUC) – business benefit or telecoms nerdvana?

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As Mobile World Congress 09 becomes a hazy memory for the mobile industry, Unified Communications09, with its sidekick VoIP for Business, came into focus this week, but thus far 'mobile' and 'unified' have looked more like distant relatives rather than a happy couple.

Last year most vendors on the Unified Communications (UC) hype-wagon focused on the desktop computer as it absorbed the desktop phone and the back room server to absorb the telephone exchange (PBX). Mobile was often seen as an add-on or companion extension to a 'real' phone, with 'follow me' services to redirect calls from the fixed number to the mobile and so on. This ignores the reality that the mobile is increasingly the handset of choice for most employees and consumers, not the landline.

Unified communications advocates tout many benefits, the main ones revolving around the concept of presence, or the 'state' of the individuals who might be contacted. Are they available, and in some cases what is the best way to reach them? Those vendors with a heritage of understanding multiple modes of communication – email, text, instant messaging, fax as well as voice and voicemail – and perhaps a memory of the term 'unified messaging', will convert and route one mode to another in an attempt to find the best way to contact the intended recipient.

However, very few UC products take into account the intent of the initiator and its effect on the circumstances of the receiver at the moment of communication. Some emails are best not spoken aloud, some communication is deliberately only meant to be one-way, and sometimes there are grey areas between 'busy' and 'available'. The concept of presence needs to evolve a little further from its orientation around person-to-person phone calling.

There are other vendors with their hearts in the mobile camp who take a different approach,

linking radio connected handsets to cheaper fixed lines – fixed mobile convergence (FMC) – but they also have had a slightly blinkered view. Their emphasis has been on short-circuiting cellular airtime costs, sometimes at the expense of, and sometimes for the benefit of, the operator.

The main approaches divide along the lines of adding either complexity in the network, or in the handset. Small-scale extensions to the cellular networks – femtocells and picocells – allow the mobile carriers to keep control. An extra radio – typically Wi-Fi – in the handset can sometimes drive the same agenda, particularly through the use of tunnelling-style solutions for example using standards such as Unlicensed Mobile Access (UMA) to essentially make the wireless LAN act like a cellular base station, keeping the mobile carrier in charge. Other approaches cut the mobile carrier out by carrying voice over IP directly over Wi-Fi and then onto a fixed broadband network.

The piece often ignored by the FMC solutions is that while the individual flexibility of the mobile phone user is well supported, the business relationships with their peers – what in the fixed network is offered by the PBX, buddy lists in the IM world or aliases for email – is rarely evident. Deployments offering hunt groups, hold and forwarding calls, picking up calls for the team or department to mobile phones are unusual. The link between the mobile phone and the PBX is often tenuous, even though FMC should make it more straightforward.

FMC does bring other benefits, and no matter what technology is used, location awareness is a key feature that could deliver several benefits. The location of the handset is known to a level of precision – at least within the range of a fixed base station or access point – and more importantly this means the location of the individual is also known. This information adds huge intelligence to the context of presence as it

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can indicate proximity to other forms of communications or to other individuals or whether the person is in a known, safe or trusted location – office, home etc.

Unified Communications and Fixed Mobile Convergence products offer several potential benefits to large and small businesses – collapsing diverse communication media into a single manageable stream and reducing costs – but when deployed in isolation or with little consideration to the way individuals interact, they miss out on something very important.

Communication supports, not replaces, business processes, and these depend on people – who they are, what they are doing, and where they are right now. The technical marketing mantra of the 1990s was anyone, anytime, anywhere on anything – the 'Martini principle' – but the business process needs these individuals, right now, right here on the chosen medium. That is what FMUC needs to deliver.

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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