

IT Analysis – Communications – Unify or Die?

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No, not a prediction for the winner of the next UK Grand National horse race (this year it was 'Comply or Die' who won), but a siren call across the IT and communications industry for 'Unified Communications'. So is it just the buzzword du jour, the latest bandwagon to jump on, the current trend being peddled around hype cycles, or is there something real and tangible for businesses to gain benefits from?

One thing's for certain, there are now more options for connecting people than ever before – fixed, mobile, rich media, and social as well as business networking – providing more opportunities for communication to be dis-unified rather than unified. Too many points of contact, or ways to go 'on hold', coupled with multiple repositories for either typed or spoken missed messages makes life complicated for the user. A collision of IT and telecoms around IP is bearing down on the capacities of enterprise and service provider networks trying to run voice, video and regular business applications at acceptable service levels.

Add to the mix an uncertain economic landscape and an increasing pressure to bear down on costs. IT and telecoms has often been seen as an expensive business 'investment', and with new services and increasingly mobile workforces, many businesses are seeing their communications costs grow, even when supplier tariffs are shrinking.

So why invest now in unified communications?

Better to ask, what to invest in as we move along a path towards unifying our communications. This shouldn't be seen as a big bang – one day we're all over the place, next we're unified thanks to product 'x'. First it's necessary to see what unified communications is, and see how this concept and the technologies it comprises might fit into the current and future needs of the business.

One important component has been voice over IP (VoIP), not as a technology or series of technologies per se, but as part of the transition from thinking as voice telephony as a separate

service requiring its own dedicated network and endpoints, to becoming JANA (just another network application). Of course it needs its own services in the network to ensure quality and provide security, but it is a communication component, not a discrete channel.

VoIP is also important because it generated the idea of saving money by converging networks and coalescing or sharing endpoints, and running the phone system parasitically on the back of an existing data network. The reality is more complex, as many early VoIP adopters have found out. Simply throwing VoIP phones onto data networks, bashing connection capabilities together into softphones and letting the network cope just won't deliver the real benefits. The network will wilt, quality of service will falter, or if really unlucky will fall over, and users will still have a confusing array of options, often making the mobile phone look the simplest, if most expensive way to contact someone.

The interest in unified communications might be about a desire to save money over time, but crucially it has to make the business more effective and individuals more productive in the short term. There are three levels to address when considering how much and what to unify – people, processes and plumbing. People need to be in control, the processes need to be collaborative and the plumbing needs to converge.

Why do people need to be in control? Mainly to improve their time management, avoid unnecessary interruptions and get hold of people when they really need to. It's about controlling and managing a digital workflow increasingly spread across geographic and organisational boundaries. The working processes are increasingly complex and convoluted creating an opportunity for collaboration.

The cornerstone for the value that unified communications can offer is an awareness of the state and availability of those being contacted. This is summed up by the term 'presence', which is familiar to instant messaging users as the current indicator of the state of their buddy list,

but for a unified set of communications tools for an entire business, this becomes the context-aware corporate directory.

While fully integrated and federated presence delivers a powerful tool, how it is used from a social and interpersonal level is critical to whether it successfully delivers. Organisational processes and personal prowess mean that training on soft skills is more important than the technical skills of how to use the tools. This is part of the roadmap to unified communications – identifying personal and organisational efficiency.

The other major part of the roadmap which can be developed in isolation from the people and process improvements is the convergence required in the plumbing. However too many companies focus too much on this as a simply a set of technology innovations and initiatives.

The technology is important, but rather than concentrating purely on innovative communication products, more attention needs to be placed on convergence of other aspects, such as the financial management and organisational responsibility.

That means taking a different view to managing costs and charge backs to users. The budgets for the varied telephony and IT services being combined will sometimes have been managed in very different parts of the organisation – facilities, IT, procurement. The converged infrastructure required for unifying communications needs to be justified at a strategic level in the organisation, and this means converging budgets and lines of responsibility before converged technologies can start to pay dividends.

Access, communications tools and services can be dealt with separately from a commercial control perspective, with the IT infrastructure and department essentially becoming a communications service provider to the rest of the business.

Want to be successful with unified communications? Drop the narrow focus on the technology and think about how people and processes will need to evolve, and how to commercially separate plumbing from service so that the infrastructure specification isn't compromised, and services are justifiable and of real benefit for the business.

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, Dell, T-Mobile, Vodafone, EMC, Symantec and Cisco, along with other large and medium sized vendors, service providers and more specialist firms.

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