

CRN - unified comms – On demand opportunities offer green shoots – March 2009

By Bob Tarzey, Service Director, Quocirca Ltd

Many resellers will be finding it hard to motivate their customers to make new investments as the economy collapses. However, any purchase that helps them reduce business costs should at least get a hearing.

Even sound proposals that promise long-term cost savings may be considered impractical in the short term if a sizable upfront investment is required.

Unless, that is, it can be paid for out of operational expenditure and delivers an immediate operational cost saving. Such offerings are good for reseller finances too, as they offer ongoing monthly revenue.

One solution that meets all the above criteria is unified communications (UC).

Definitions of UC vary but generally it involves pulling together IP-based communications such as email, IM and web conferencing with voice communications (both fixed line and mobile) and videoconferencing.

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), reduced travel costs, and more efficient communications between employees and outsiders, as presence capabilities indicate if someone is available and how best to contact them.

The most exciting thing about UC, however, is the rapid growth of on-demand monthly subscription services which do not require an upfront investment.

Microsoft has plenty of spare cash and is investing in a new platform called BPOS (Business Productivity Online Suite).

BPOS is a UC platform that includes the Online versions of four Microsoft products: Exchange (for email), SharePoint portal, Live Meeting (for web conferencing) and Office Communication Server (OCS) for voice and video.

Microsoft is selling BPOS subscriptions direct, but they can also be sold by resellers who receive a share of the monthly fee.

Alternatively, resellers can create their own BPOS-like platform by licensing the four components themselves.

This obviously involves a sizeable upfront investment by the reseller, but Microsoft will license products to resellers using its Service Provider Licence Agreement (SPLA), which allows monthly payments by the reseller based on use.

BPOS' OCS component only enables internal peer-to-peer voice calls, so a reseller deploying its own offering could provide full on-demand voice over internet protocol (VoIP) with any additional investment in gateways that this entails.

Some resellers, such as Yorkshire-based POSTcti, are already doing this.

Microsoft is not the only show in town and the perceived threat from Google is driving the company to build up its portfolio of on-demand offerings.

Google has made a string of high-profile customer announcements around the take-up of Google Apps, an on-demand alternative to Microsoft Office, and recently announced Google Voice.

Google also recently set up its own reseller programme to penetrate the SMB market – another concern for Microsoft.

However, not all are convinced by the Microsoft or Google offerings. Some resellers and other service providers are building on-demand UC platforms using products from other vendors such as Cisco or Avaya.

One such provider is ThinkGrid, which has built its own on-demand platform with many UC components. It uses some Microsoft components (Exchange, SharePoint and Dynamics CRM) but an Asterisk-based system for voice.

It also includes Sage for accounting and BlackBerry Enterprise Server for mobile email.

Those thinking of striking out on their own may find most of their IT requirements as on-demand offerings. Acquiring enterprise-class IT and communications services for new businesses has never been so easy and it has never been so easy for resellers to supply them. Green shoots, anyone?

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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