

ITAnalysis – Unified Communications and Social networking, match made in heaven or just good friends?

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The term 'unified communications' conjures up many meanings, but is most often used by those with software or network assets to sell. Whether it is routers, switches, hubs, directories, phones or high definition video conferencing equipment, the thrust is often the same – we have the hardware to remove complexity from your network and software to unify those different modes of communication that your users 'enjoy'.

Basically it's the IP dividend of voice over IP (VoIP) mixed with video over IP plus anything else over IP with a bit of contextual status thrown in via 'presence'.

Sounds good to those managing a complex mix of networks, or those paying for separate forms of connection when they can see what looks like a great big free (or perceived to be free) fat internet pipe that will take all IP traffic. Unify the packets over IP and you've unified communications, right?

The problems come when trying to see how users fit into the deal and it does not always end in a fully cross functional, matrix managed, dispersed workforce collaborating right across the extended enterprise. The technology is fine, the commercial aspect works, but the social side just does not deliver, because it depends on acceptance, initiative and commitment from the workforce, and generating that takes more work than installing a CD or network appliance.

So how about taking a different approach?

There is much talk about the influx of consumer technology into the workplace, and an interesting area to look at here is social networking. However this time it is not about the use of social networking tools to connect with customers, reinvigorate marketing budgets or make the business look cool. Nor is it about the fears of employees spending so much of their time glued to their social networks that they forget to work, or how to interact with real

people; although these issues do merit some attention from organisations.

An aspect of social networking that might catalyse and support the broader adoption of unified communications is the current trend towards 'social dashboards'. These are coming about partly in recognition that most people like and use a multiplicity of social communications tools – YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, instant messaging, email etc – to hook up with their friends and contacts, yet would like to avoid the complexity of using these as separate applications. A single live 'portal' embracing the other tools would be ideal, but who would be the master site/supplier?

It may be too early to narrow down as there have been false dawns and social networking failures, but current players are positioning themselves as 'accommodating' as the market evolves. Recent innovations and updates from Microsoft around Live Essentials and the new look Twitter are examples of the trend towards this.

So what is a 'social dashboard' and what are the characteristics that have merit for consumers, which might turn out to be a valuable in a business context? There are several recurring themes:

- **Feeds** – these are live updates, tickers, messages, blogged and tweeted lifestreams or even streaming audio and videos. Ever present, constantly updated without the need for the recipient to make requests.
- **Finds** – uploaded responses or comment using scraps of information, interesting webpages, uploaded photos and videos can be simply and easily fed in and propagated to all contacts, 'inline' and without the need to open new windows or be diverted by separate applications.

- **Feedback** – instant opinion and comment on feeds and finds from all those in the network, a loose collaboration, trending and sometimes herd-like behaviour in the crowd. Voting and recommendation engines might seem too democratic for business decisions that need top down command and control, but with suitable moderation there may be wisdom in the crowd.
- **Filters** – the key to making sense of a cacophony of information. Filtering by areas of interest, favouritism dependant on the contact type (e.g. messages from the boss, or the activities of a key customer), current activities or status (do not disturb, busy working, on holiday so friends only etc). Organisations may also be able to push down centralised policies to provide automated filtering and implement security measures to block malware, filter inappropriate content and mitigate risky behaviour or data leakage, as well as permit more personal policies to improve productivity by adapting to ensure information is relevant to the context of the place, time and person.

Finally there is also the underlying ability grow the network by finding contacts, or suggesting potential friends. When applied with business intelligence, this mechanism of seeking out the right person to contact would be extremely useful in many organisations where the traditional 'org charts' are always out of date or the sheer volume of external relationships make the divisions of 'employee' and 'contractor' meaningless.

Buddy lists and presence directories are already part of many unified communications solutions, but they could go a lot further to envelop the groups, commonalities and relationships that people really build their communications networks on. Simply having a directory with phone number, contact details and current status or presence is not enough, and the social network element provides some provenance, knowledge of, or social value of the contact. Social networks have meaning attached to the link as well as the point of the connection.

Many unified communications vendors have overly focused on the networking technology and forgotten the key part of communications; it is about people. Perhaps they could learn something relevant for businesses from social and consumer oriented tools?

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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