

# Cisco's cloud play: UCS and Vblocks - what's the game?

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## Quocirca Comment

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Cisco has been trying to reinvent itself for a while. Coming from a complete network focus, it slowly morphed into a company with telephony, videoconferencing and other offerings that still played hard to its core competencies.

In 2009, Cisco surprised the market with its announcement of entering the server market, with the announcement of its unified computing system (UCS). UCS took a modular approach to the server, based around a rack of blades with "top of rack" high speed networking equipment from Cisco's Nexus product range. Using VMware virtualisation, BMC management software and Microsoft Windows Server as an operating system, UCS was aimed fairly and squarely at a specific part of the market with specific Windows-based workloads.

The markets were a little unsure, yet UCS has proved itself. Cisco has opened the platform up and it is a better peer member of a heterogeneous environment than it was, being able to co-exist nicely with systems running Microsoft's Hyper-V virtualisation hypervisors.

Later on in 2009, Cisco also set up a joint venture company in conjunction with EMC (and investment from VMware and Intel). Called The Virtual Computing Environment Company (VCE), the company has defined a platform called Vblock, which is touted as a platform for cloud using a converged infrastructure platform as building blocks. UCS is a part of Vblock, but Vblock does not replicate UCS, and UCS is not necessarily a Vblock – messaging that is causing some confusion in the markets.

But, Cisco now boasts a good raft of customers who have chosen either UCS or Vblock as a foundation for their private or hybrid cloud implementations. For example, Princeton Insurance has taken UCS as a platform for its private cloud, as has Seven Corners. Terremark

and SAVVIS have taken UCS as a basis for improving system density and as a multi-tenant cloud hosting platform respectively. The NASA Enterprise Application Competency Center (EACC) has taken Vblock as the basis for its private cloud approach, and UK-based Cobweb has taken Vblock as the platform for its hosting services.

However, Cisco does need to do more. Although it has been successful through both UCS and Vblock, that does seem to be despite itself. Its marketing and visibility is not as high as its competitors, and it also needs to be able to disprove the perception that Cisco is proprietary and does not work well alongside other vendor's equipment. One of the arguments that was touted against UCS at the beginning was that its internal architecture was proprietary. This is true – but so is any blade architecture. It is not possible to swap blades between different manufacturers' chassis, as the interconnects and busses are different. So it is with Cisco, and like everyone else, once you hit the periphery of the platform, it will use standards, such as http, TCP, SNMP and so on.

Cisco's CEO, John Chambers, has always been good at talking Cisco above where it is. The problem has tended to be with those at the coal-face: these people tend to be pure technologists, and putting the UCS and Vblock messages into terminology that makes sense at a business level has never been a strong suit for them.

However, Cisco has done well in creating a channel for UCS in particular, and VCE has managed to get onto the radars of many large systems integrators who are now creating their own "solutions" based on the Vblock building blocks. With UCS being aimed at the high-end of the market, Cisco and its partners can afford to have a high-touch model, with all the business discussions taking place once the lead account

manager has forced an entry into the organisation. However, Quocirca believes that fewer doors would need to be forced if Cisco's messaging was more business-focused, and more above the parapet.

VCE has a different problem. It has, from the outset, tried to be a company that has an appeal across the range of business sizes. Its original offerings were the Vblock1 and Vblock2, essentially systems for the mid-sized enterprise and the large enterprise respectively. And a Vblock0 was released to go further down into the smaller organisation size markets. Therefore, VCE needs to be able to take a less high-touch approach, and its messaging has to be crisp and hang on use-case scenarios and customer wins.

Overall, although Cisco is not necessarily a name that comes first to mind when looking a total cloud platform, it has done a good job to date with its direct UCS offering and through its UCS components in Vblocks through VCE.

Away from being a "safe bet" network provider to join up various parts of an organisation's hybrid cloud, Cisco can be a full-platform play. For those who feel that a modular approach to cloud is the way forward (and Quocirca is within this camp), Cisco (or its sister company VCE) should be on the list as a company to investigate.

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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.

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