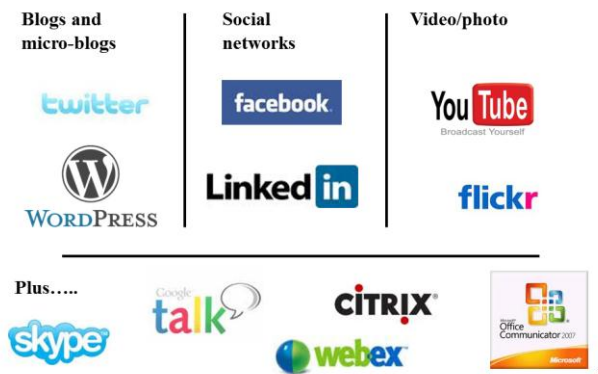


ComputerWeekly – SME buyers guide, unified Comms for the smaller business

By Bob Tarzey, Analyst and Director, Quocirca Ltd

Unified communications is about providing a single platform to drive and manage all the different methods via which employees now communicate with each other and the outside world. This article looks at the options for SMEs.

UC – managing multiple comms channels quocirca Business and IT Analysis



For any organisation, unified communications is about providing a single platform to drive and manage all the different methods via which employees now communicate with each other and the outside world.

A decade or so ago, this largely amounted to a debate about whether voice communications should be run over the same network as computer communications, the latter having already converged on TCP/IP (often just called IP and also the basis of internet communications). Whatever view a given organisation took back then, the market has driven things forward to make UC a reality, whether they liked or not.

The number of communications tools that are available to employees and which they choose to use has proliferated as the "web 2.0" revolution has progressed. These are largely internet-based and include cheap or even free voice services, as well as other means of communication, including

instant messaging, social networking and videoconferencing.

This change in the way businesses communicate with each other has many benefits for small and mid-sized business (SMBs), but there also downsides for those that do not manage it well. Any organisation needs to understand how its employees are communicating and provide a platform to manage and monitor this; SMBs are no exception.

Benefits of UC quocirca Business and IT Analysis



There are four main areas where UC can benefit SMBs.

1. UC enables SMBs to easily link in to the business processes of other organisations. This makes the automated participation in supply chains, distribution channels and support networks simpler.
2. Driving communications across a single IP based network is cheaper than managing multiple separate networks for different communications channels. Furthermore many of the tools used for UC are cheap or free to use. Providing a choice means that cheap data communications are often used where relatively expensive phone calls would have been made in the past.
3. Used well, UC can help an organisation drive down its carbon footprint. This is both through making communications that drive

business processes more efficient but also through replacing the need for many face-to-face meetings through the provision of online collaboration tools.

- UC makes it easier for employees to do their jobs from wherever they happen to be. This makes it easier for many to achieve a better work life balance. It can also lead to more flexible hiring, for example enabling the creation of virtual call centres where the employees involved work from home.

Dangers of UC

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Run away costs



Security



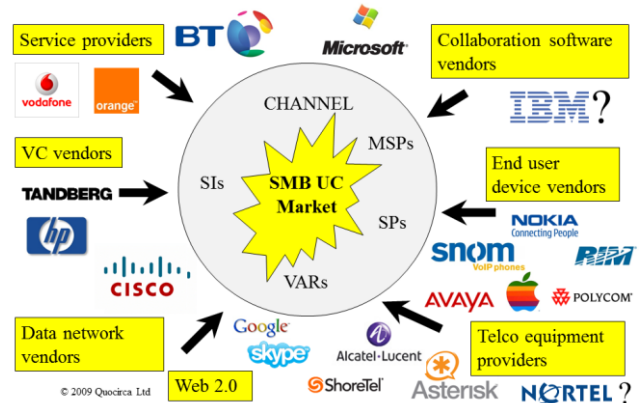
Compliance

However, there are downsides to be considered; mainly these arise when UC is not managed well:

- Without the proper guidance, the cost of using UC may actually spiral out of control. For example, a UC strategy that enables mobile workers must include mobile communications, but this could result in video being streamed over a mobile network rather than a cheaper broadband connection. The right guidance and controls are needed on what tools to use and when.
- Multiple channels of communication mean multiple ways of attacking a network. A pervasive security strategy is needed that covers all channels, not just keeping threats at bay but also ensuring employees do not misuse the tools available to them and end up leaking confidential data, be it accidental or intentional.
- Keeping a record of communications for compliance purposes becomes more complex the more channels there are. Only by having a well-managed platform can organisations keep on top of this and keep a consistent record of how employees are communicating with each other and the outside world.

A collision of vendors

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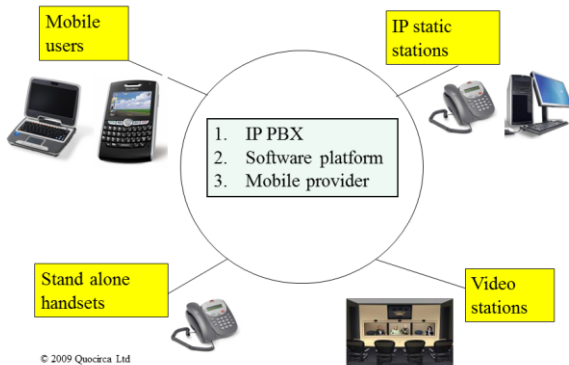


One of the biggest challenges with UC is selecting the technology to use and the vendors to provide it. By its very nature, UC has led to a collision of vendors all after a cut of the same business. This includes:

- Mobile and fixed line serviced providers, keen to provide the bandwidth.
- Traditional telco equipment providers that are keen to maintain their existing relationships and sell IP PBXs that enable voice communications and other services over IP networks
- Data networking vendors that want you to replace your traditional PBX with their own kit.
- Software vendors that believe you don't even need a PBX
- End use device suppliers that want to own the user interface to UC
- The suppliers of certain "web 2.0" services that think they are the best way forward
- Video conferencing vendors that will tell you no UC experience is complete without the ability to see, as well as hear, the participants in an online conference.

The approach taken by any SMB will depend on which tools matter most to its business, but also who its incumbent suppliers are. At the end of the day, putting a UC strategy in place will be as much about integrating existing tools as deploying new ones. One key decision is deciding what the core platform should be.

UC set up – platform strategies quocirca
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When it comes to the platform there are three basic choices:

1. Base UC around an IP PBX – this allows voice communications to be driven over IP and the internet and allows the integration of voice with other IP communication based services such as email, instant messaging and all these “web 2.0” channels.

2. Ditch the PBX altogether and go for software platform such as Microsoft Lync (previously Office Communication Server/OCS) or IBM Lotus Domino. For small SMBs this can be a pragmatic approach as such platforms can be procured as on-demand services. These are not just based on the platforms of large software vendors; many service providers are putting together their own on-demand UC services based on a range of underlying technology that suits them, but is largely irrelevant to the user
3. Mobile network provider approach – again there is no traditional PBX involved. Mobile service providers are keen to grow their presence in organisations of all sizes and put themselves at the core of UC. Often this will involve the deployment of pico or femto cells on the customer premises to provide a consistent high quality link to broader services.

UC sounds great on paper but achieving it involves a complex set of choices. As you progress your organisation towards the inevitable “utopia” of UC that your employees are embracing, whether you like it or not, make sure all options are evaluated to maximise the benefits and minimise the risk.

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.

Details of Quocirca's work and the services it offers can be found at

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