

The Advantages of Unified Communications

Turning Pain Points into Profit



Contents

Understanding Unified Communications	3
Unified Communications and IP Telephony	4
Unified Communications and Web Real Time Communication	5
Benefits and Advantages of Unified Communications	6
Easier Collaboration and Faster Decision Making	6
Improved ROI.....	7
More Rewarding Customer Experiences	8
Greater Organizational Agility	8
Better Mobility and Utilization of BOYD Culture.....	9
Breaking Down Distributed Team Barriers.....	9
Implementing Unified Communications Solutions.....	10
On-Premises	10
Mobile UC	10
Secure UC	11
Cloud-Based UC	11
Interoperability.....	12
Unified Communications Advanced Features	12
Presence	12
Instant Messaging and Unified Messaging.....	14
Mobility	14
Conclusion	16
References.....	16

Many problems plague large and small enterprises alike, including customer retention and ease of communication. Customers are growing savvier by the day and they understand that they have the power to change brand loyalties easily. Additionally, in a world of instant gratification, project deadlines are becoming more rigid and demanding. Sales representatives and employees now need to have a complete view of the multi-channel activities their prospects and clients engage in. And, most importantly, distributed teams are a norm and they require a separate set of guidelines for robust collaboration and co-operation.

The good news is that all of these apparent challenges are opportunities for growth. Since these issues are common to most businesses, the ones that can rise above them will be the future market leaders. To become a market leader, communication, the backbone of profitability and effective operations, must be seamless.

The global UC Market will exceed 75 billion dollars by 2020.

Grand View Research

Understanding Unified Communications

Unified Communications (UC) is a relatively novel concept and it is largely misunderstood. Companies and vendors have different definitions of what UC is and isn't. Some believe it is a stand-alone package, while others think of it as an integrated environment where different technologies come together to facilitate a better exchange of ideas.

Simply put, UC breaks down barriers and brings together synchronous communication channels, like video conferencing and instant messaging, with asynchronous media, like social media and email. UC also includes the option to look up the availability of participants, making communication across channels and media types convenient and easy. Users can have all the details of a conversation under one virtual roof and access

all communication channels from one single, unified screen. UC has profound productivity and client satisfaction implications and usually includes features like:

- Worker Mobility
- User Status
- Video Conferencing
- IP-Based telephony
- Instant Messaging

UC comprises of several technologies working in tandem with a consistent user interface across all applications that can be accessed from the same dashboard. Once users have identified the people they wish to connect with, they can right click on that user's name and choose the best communication channel from a drop down menu.

Users also have the ability to move conversations to different communication methods. For example, if an instant message chat lacks clarity either of the participants can launch directly into a video conference or an audio call. UC Presence directories not only show the availability of in-office employees, but also all distributed team members, clients, and stakeholders who have access to an interoperable UC platform.

Unified Communications and IP Telephony

The popularity of UC is steadily rising, but there is still a lot of confusion around how UC relates to IP telephony.

IP telephony, also known as Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), refers to the replacement of PSTN lines with Ethernet cables to enable voice and video calls between one or more individuals on the internet. UC is based on the foundation of IP telephony technology. If a business relies on Plain Old Telephone Systems (POTS) to implement UC, the costs associated will be prohibitive. Copper wire telephone lines can carry voice and multi-media data, but the utilization of the bandwidth is poor at best. This is the reason why using internet technology is preferred.

The protocol that governs the setup and termination of UC sessions is known as the Session Initiation Protocol (SIP). SIP is favored over other protocol types because it allows users to start or end calls, chats, and conferences. Therefore, people with little to no technical knowledge can also make optimal use of UC, and it requires minimal interference to operate efficiently once it is setup.

Unified Communications and Web Real Time Communication

We already know that UC brings different communication and interaction channels to a single screen, but individual applications still have to be installed and configured, something generally done by the vendor or the IT department.

This is where Web Real Time Communication (WebRTC) comes in. With WebRTC, browsers like Safari and Firefox communicate through APIs that enable chats, video and audio conferences, IP voice calls, and direct media transfers without the need to download third party apps or plugins. Usually, an app such as Skype is installed as a browser plugin or desktop application in order for employees to video chat with one another. However, with WebRTC, people will be able to initiate video conversations by selecting an icon next to the Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter profile of the person they want to speak to.

UC vendors have already recognized the potential of WebRTC, and, in the near future, UC and WebRTC might become synonymous.

IP telephony refers to the replacement of PSTN lines with Ethernet cables to enable voice and video calls between one or more individuals on the internet.

Benefits and Advantages of Unified Communications

Before discussing the advantages and benefits of UC, it is important to realize that video capabilities are not a competitive edge that is unique to UC. Video conferencing is already an extremely popular and widely used technology, and productivity boosts that it brings should not be attributed to UC.

That being said, the beauty and simplicity of UC lies in the time that an enterprise can save by finding employees more easily, jumping from one communication channel to another seamlessly, and in bringing the power of a full complement of communication media to mobile devices that operate through carrier data or Wi-Fi.

Easier Collaboration and Faster Decision Making

According to research by Fonolo, employees spend seventy-four minutes every day trying to reach co-workers and peers. They also spend thirty-three minutes a day setting up meetings and attempting to bring all the participants together. This is unacceptable.

UC has the ability to connect colleagues through the consolidated Presence directory.

Employees spend seventy-four minutes every day trying to reach co-workers and peers.

Fonolo

Thanks to its integrated nature, users can easily escalate from an online chat to a video call directly from the instant messaging interface. This leads to easier collaboration, where people are bound to connect with each other on the first try, and faster decision making, where miscommunications can be clarified instantly.

Cisco has found that more than 50 percent of organizations that use UC save at least 20 minutes per employee every day by using Voice and Video calls more frequently. As a result, employee engagement improves.

Improved ROI

The communication channels that generally come together to create the UC experience are also used as stand-alone applications. Given the sheer volume of data that comes through from various sources there is bound to be a lot of redundancy and duplicated efforts. With UC, everything is instantly accessible from the same drop down menu and all interactions with an individual are logged into the workroom or bucket assigned to the person. This automatically improves the Return on Investment (ROI) for the separate technologies.

The tangible ROI of a Unified Communications solution for a 10,000-person enterprise is approximately \$15.5 million.

8X8

The ROI of a UC solution is dependent upon a number of factors:

- More deals can be closed in a shorter period of time.
- Employees can communicate more quickly and more effectively.
- Businesses can hire more remote workers, saving on employment costs.
- Employees can communicate with one another and with clients while on the go with mobile UC.

The various advantages and benefits offered by Unified Communications (UC) also lead to better market reputation as a business that is agile, innovative, and customer-centric. This win is invaluable.

More Rewarding Customer Experiences

With more and more vendors adopting WebRTC to complement UC, there are now better client interactions. Thanks to WebRTC, UC can now be a part of other stand-alone platforms like a contact center software. With unified messaging and file sharing, not only do employees have access to consolidated data now they can jump from chats to audio calls to video calls without ever needing to grapple with multiple windows and apps. Employees can streamline their work, raising call resolution rates and overall buyer satisfaction.

When WebRTC becomes the norm, companies will be able to attach a large portion of the UC power to their social media profiles and interested parties will be able to chat or initiate audio calls with reps, from the browser without even needing to look up contact information or opening the email client.

More than 50% of organizations that use UC save at least 20 minutes per employee every day by using Voice and Video calls more frequently.

Cisco

Greater Organizational Agility

This is a by-product of employee productivity and improved decision making. The very aim of UC solutions is to ensure that stakeholders of a business and their buyers can come together and collaborate without the hassles of distance, time zones, and preferred channels of communication.

With a well deployed and interoperable UC that can integrate with other enterprise solutions like contact centers and CRMs, all parties are better connected. They speak and interact in real time using channels that best fit their purpose and are assured of the fact that important details are captured and stored in one central hub. These competitive advantages may seem unquantified, but as the size of a business grows, UC proves to be the most cost effective solution.

Better Mobility and Utilization of BOYD Culture

Traditionally, UC hasn't included integration with mobile devices, like phones and tablets. But given the fact that large numbers of employees and representatives are leaving their office cubicles and adopting increasingly itinerant work styles, it is essential to offer them the same features and advantages that their office laptops and personal computers boast. This is where UCaaS proves to be useful.

When a UC solution is deployed in the cloud, mobile apps also become available. Thus end users simply need to download and install the application. The same can't be said for on-premises variants, which require businesses to custom code the integration between the UC environment and mobile devices.

With mobile UC, the culture of Bring Your Own Device is also encouraged. Workers on the go can interact with clients and prospects on their own tablets and phones and this familiarity, in conjunction with the single screen convenience of UC, saves up to eleven minutes per employee every day because of increased mobile productivity.

Breaking Down Distributed Team Barriers

Distributed teams are a challenge and they will remain so for the foreseeable future. Ninety percent of the communication that happens between two people relies on non-verbal cues. This is particularly true for people who do not meet and mingle with each other on a daily basis. Video conferencing and immersive telepresence have solved this problem to a large extent. But these technologies do not really integrate well with other, more preferred communication channels like emails.

On the other hand, UC:

- offers presence to teams across the globe,

- Brings together all possible synchronous and asynchronous communication channels in one drop-down menu, and
- allows employees to take their conversations and interactions with them wherever they go with the help of mobile UC.

Implementing Unified Communications Solutions

The growth of the UC industry is showing no signs of slowing down. In the very near future, UC may transcend the status of a buzzword and become a non-negotiable requirement of a progressive, agile business.

It is important to understand the factors that influence the deployment and ROI success of a UC solution.

On-Premises

First and foremost, UC is an architecturally complicated concept. Because SIP is used, the end users can easily click icons and buttons to take care of their communication needs. But the underlying integration is not as simple as the dashboard looks. This is the reason why most IT departments should look for a solution that is a good fit with the existing architecture of the enterprise. If major overhauls are needed, then the effort and the initial financial outlay may render the installation unfeasible.

Mobile UC

We have already discussed that mobility needs to be a part of a comprehensive UC solution that actually works. UC is data intensive. Where on-premises installation is

concerned, high bandwidth Ethernet cables and the capabilities of the ISP can take care of jitter and latency issues offering crystal clear video and audio. But the same can't be guaranteed for mobile devices that may have rely on the carrier data plan to leverage UC. Thus, before deploying a solution, the effectiveness of its mobile application has to be properly evaluated and questions like which carrier to switch to, Wi-Fi etiquette, and protocols for itinerant workers and other minutiae have to be properly considered.

Secure UC

Security is another primary concern for UC solutions. It is basically a central hub of business data including contact information of high value clients, business persuasion secrets, and important sales and operational processes that are not to be shared with competitors. Most UC vendors understand this concern and deploy security measures across different layers of UC architecture for a robust system that can protect itself from malware and other attacks.

However, given the rapidly mutating nature of network viruses and attacks, it is important to opt for providers who understand the value of early detection. They should have border patrolling where the enterprise LAN meets the internet WAN and should regularly monitor the UC database for anomalies.

UC Providers should have border patrolling where the enterprise LAN meets the internet WAN and should regularly monitor the UC database for anomalies.

Cloud-Based UC

The fourth thing to keep in mind is the flavor of the UC solution that will be deployed. The cloud-based alternatives are more open to integrations and mobility. However, they

may not work for enterprises that have to store all their data on-premises because of security restrictions. Moreover, according to Nemertes Research, larger businesses have a lower TOC if they opt for the desktop installed solutions instead of UCaaS.

Interoperability

Interoperability is the final evaluation factor to be considered. A UC solution should be able to communicate well with end devices that are not supplied by the same vendor. In some cases, they may even have to connect to UC platforms that are setup by other providers. If UC is to be democratized and used without reservations, interoperability is a must. There are only a few market players that have tested the waters with interoperability and thorough research reveals the best fit for a business.

Unified Communications Advanced Features

In a Broadsoft Poll it was noted that Presence, instant and unified messaging, and mobility are the top three features that all enterprises want in their UC solution. This section covers all three and points to additional functionalities that are staples of the UC experience.

Presence

Presence is an accurate representation of a user's availability. It is really not that different from the Skype interface. Where UC scores with its sophistication is the ability to automatically update this Presence or status.

Think of it this way. UC's USP lies in transparency. It allows all stakeholders to know the status of their peers so that they can plan split-second meetings and conference calls without having to individually message participants and worry about a suitable time. But

if the process of setting the Presence status is manual, the factor of human error will creep in and the effectiveness of the system will be compromised.

This is why UC Presence is geared to detect user activity and change the status accordingly. If an employee is already in a Video conference, it doesn't make sense to rout client calls to the individual. The almost sentient UC system understands these nuances and works accordingly.

Businesses can also:

- **Opt for Presence-Based Call Routing:** Based on what an employee is doing, the Presence status can change automatically and incoming calls, chat requests, and video requests can be directed to the individuals who are appropriately engaged to reduce overwhelm.

It is no use sending through an audio call request to someone who is already participating in a conference. But the same can be sent to an employee who is chatting with a colleague via IM. UC interfaces also have pre-built message caches that can be used to quickly intimate chat partners of incoming requests so that the conversation can be resumed later on.

- **Create a Network of Experts who can be Reached Through Presence Status:** This is particularly useful for novice reps and call center executives. These employees can quickly look up the availability of seniors with considerable subject knowledge and chat with them prior to initiating challenging client calls or taking on troubleshooting requests. Presence can truly improve productivity on all fronts.
- **Use VIP Barge-Based on Presence:** UC solutions do offer users the ability to over-ride the Presence status of employees. This privilege is reserved for top executives or very important clients. If these individuals call or request a chat, the system sends in the line irrespective of what the availability of the representative is set to.

Instant Messaging and Unified Messaging

Unified Messaging is not something that has hit the market on the coat tails of UC. It has been around for a very long time. Most businesses know that unified messaging refers to an inbox that is capable of receiving fax messages, voice mails, and emails from different recipients.

It has some of the fringe benefits of a comprehensive UC platform since it allows employees to retrieve information that would otherwise be scattered across channels from one bucket. With UC, the concept of unified messaging evolves. Any interaction that happens through the UC system is instantly added to the workroom or bucket assigned to an individual contact. This includes chat histories, files, and recorded video conferencing sessions.

In order to make the most of this wonderful repository, businesses should opt for the ability to turn voicemails, emails, or even chat histories into tasks or to-dos that can be added to the calendar of the employee.

Instant messaging is a very convenient real time communication channel through which employees can look up the availability of colleagues. For optimal use of IM functionality, businesses can add-on the ability:

- to have group IM chats
- to retract messages or edit them
- to share large files from the system
- to escalate the chat into a one-on-one video call

Mobility

UC and mobility are closely connected. To recap, mobility in UC solutions is the ability to equip itinerant employees with all the conveniences and features of the UC system that they love and use on their office desktops. Only when this is a reality, true mobile

productivity will be achieved. And given the possibility that offices may soon become a thing of the past, hitting this goal is imperative for enterprises.

Typically speaking, mobile UC apps have a streamlined dashboard that offers various options to users. The interface is adjusted to fit the smaller screen size and limited keyboard space. The primary dashboard links to features like the Presence directory, voice calls, the central information hub, and even social channels.

To make the most of UC mobility businesses must:

- Approve the devices that employees use as a part of the BYOD drive. This includes ensuring that the mobiles and laptops have robust protection and that they are disabled from connecting to public and unsafe Wi-Fi connections.
- Enable a distinct Presence status “Outside the Office” which is more telling than the generic “Away.” With “Outside the Office” as an availability indication, the UC system can trigger the Find Me/Follow Me functionality running through alternative numbers like the employee’s home phone, Softphone, and mobile devices in a pre-defined sequence to improve chances of connecting with the individual irrespective of his location.
- Enable geolocation tracking through the UC app. This is particularly useful for demo experts on the move. The UC system has the technology to match the location of the client putting through the demo request call with the coordinates of the field reps so that the one who is nearest to the caller can be put on the case, cutting down on travel expenses.

Apart from these advanced functionalities, video and audio conferencing, IP-PBX favorites like voice call, group hunt, and IVR are also a part of most UC solutions. File sharing that is independent and a part of the sub-interfaces of IM and video calling is also essential. Since these technologies have well established benefits and best practices, they apply without much change to the UC environment.

Conclusion

UC is a collaboration boon. It has revolutionized the way companies interact with their stakeholders and their clients. It has reduced the overwhelm that results from the need to use the half a dozen communication channels and has replaced it with a setup that still respects communication preferences, but brings their scattered advantages and access to a single dashboard.

By 2020, UC will be ubiquitous. Are you on the same page as this potentially business changing concept?

References

1. Ten Unified Communications Statistics Every CIO Should Know by Blanca Allery, 3CX, <http://www.3cx.com/blog/unified-communications/uc-statistics/>, Accessed on 11th May, 2016
2. 7 Integrated Features of Unified Communications by Cara Knight, Networking Exchange Blog, <https://networkingexchangeblog.att.com/enterprise-business/7-integrated-features-of-unified-communications/#fbid=P6dRWkp3ykT>, Accessed on 11th May, 2016
3. Mobility and the Future of Unified Communications and Collaboration, Dimension Data, <http://www.dimensiondata.com/Global/Latest-Thinking/Mobility-and-the-future-of-unified-communications-and-collaboration>, Accessed on 11th May 2016
4. Microsoft's unified messaging software, voicemail: Pros and cons by Brien Posy, TechTarget,

<http://searchunifiedcommunications.techtarget.com/tip/Microsofts-unified-messaging-software-voicemail-Pros-and-cons>, Accessed on 11th May 2016

5. Five unified communications trends that change the collaboration game by Irwin Lazar, TechTarget,
<http://searchunifiedcommunications.techtarget.com/feature/Five-unified-communications-trends-that-change-the-collaboration-game>, Accessed on 11th May, 2016
6. Unified Communications (UC) by Margaret Rouse, TechTarget,
<http://searchunifiedcommunications.techtarget.com/definition/unified-communications>, Accessed on 11th May, 2016
7. What are the benefits of UC?, Digium,
<https://www.digium.com/solutions/unified-communications/what-are-the-benefits-of-uc>, Accessed on 11th May 2016
8. Unified Communications Is Strongly Correlated with Increased Productivity, IPSMarx, <http://www.ipsmarx.com/blog/unified-communications-is-proven-to-increase-productivity-in-businesses-here-are-the-statistics/>, Accessed on 11th May, 2016
9. Image icon courtesy of [Alfredo Hernandez](#) from [Flaticon](#) is licensed by [Creative Commons BY 3.0](#).