

Unified communications: technology or strategy?

David Porta looks at the concept of unified communication and what it can do for your business.

Investing in any new technology without due diligence and a practical knowledge of how it aligns with your business processes is like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.

No more is this the case than with unified communications (UC), the 'wonder' technology solution that saves dollars and boosts staff productivity through integration of every aspect of your business communications from email, phone systems and CRM solutions to video conferencing.

However, with the rapid advances in these technologies, many businesses have rushed in seeking to get competitive advantage, or simply to reduce costs, only to find they are not achieving the promised gains – largely because they have seen UC as a discrete technological solution and not as a part of their overall business strategy.

UC should be considered as a strategic solution and not simply about adding another technology to your business infrastructure. Rather it requires taking a step back, assessing IT operations and organisational structure and realigning them with your business requirements – not purely as a complementary set of technologies.

Without a UC strategy, businesses are unable to tap into the hidden potential of UC which can transform the way people work, 'ultimately by passing the work of people onto the system through the merging of voice and data platforms and integration of business processes that take advantage of instant messaging, email, video and voice. When implemented properly, such a transformation can improve productivity and communication, as well as reduce costs.

Part of the problem with unrealised return on investment with UC in New Zealand is that often the key decision makers simply don't understand the true state of their business. Indeed, in around 90 percent of the projects I have been involved in, the senior executives' practical knowledge of the business does not align with how it actually operates on a day-to-day basis. How can new technology be deployed successfully on this basis?

UC can deliver significant improvements in staff efficiency by providing a very personal approach that touches anyone within a business who carries out a task – every group or staff member will have repetitive activities that can be automated through UC. However, if the solution is not implemented in line with the

way people work; it won't be a catalyst for efficiency gains.

Additionally, it is also often the case that staff are not fully versed in all of the capabilities that UC solutions provide. Thus, tapping the hidden potential of UC also requires a change management approach and training to ensure staff can leverage UC to do their work more efficiently by delegating tasks to the system.

UC can deliver benefits for any size business, as long as it is considered a strategic and not a technological solution. Take a small business; for example, a cleaning company with 20 mobile staff, all using mobile phones with a central office taking incoming calls and dispatching work. The IP-PBX phone system and CRM (customer management) solution operate separately, requiring an average time of 15 minutes for processing calls, costing about \$10 per call. With a UC strategy all staff could operate through a single mobile plan that includes business lines tied into a backend system – in other words, integration of IP-PBX and CRM solutions and selection of the best telecommunications plan to yield the highest efficiency gains and cost savings. Staff would spend less time identifying callers, dispatching and creating activity records and more time delivering better customer service.

Beyond the core capabilities that UC provides, further benefits can be achieved by integrating these capabilities with existing line of business applications. A simple example of where efficiency gains can be made is with time-sheets. Most organisations use separate applications for time recording and calendars, meaning staff spend on average 45 to 60 minutes per person per week completing their timesheets by switching between applications. UC provides an interface to integrate these applications so that every time a calendar booking is made it automatically feeds into the timesheet. Time savings can be huge if you consider that 45 to 60 minutes a week over a 52-week year amounts to up to 52

hours, or more than a week's productivity, per person per year.

But how can these benefits be measured? A lot of organisations have deployed UC at its most basic level, Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) to replace legacy analogue telephony systems, only to discover there is no framework for accurately measuring the cost-savings and productivity gains. Again, this is where UC must be strategic, an organisational change management project with baseline measures established at the onset across the organisation – from travel time, specific task work and telecommunications costs to customer satisfaction – which can serve as comparative measures of improvement for subsequent business practices.

Once the business strategy is understood and the specific service requirements of the business, the hidden potential of UC can be realised, following which decisions can be made around the delivery of the UC solution, whether that is on-premise, hosted or hybrid.

UC is as much about collaboration between systems as it is about communication between people. Therefore it should be implemented in a way that is symbiotic with existing systems, designed to integrate with as many in-house infrastructures and information systems as possible as well as planned future solutions.

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