

WHITE PAPER

The Changing Face of Unified Communications

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In business environments, few variables are as important as communication. Although this is a simple consideration, it has far-reaching effects. After all, companies that are not able to effectively communicate and collaborate with external partners, clients and customers may soon find themselves facing diminishing returns and decreased profit margins. Internal communications are equally important—operations can quickly turn sour when co-workers are unable to properly connect and share ideas across the organization.

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As a result, the tools used to facilitate communications are incredibly important, and organizations must be especially judicious in regard to what they have in place to facilitate these efforts. In the past, companies could exclusively rely on “snail mail,” face-to-face interactions and landlines to effectively speak to others and share ideas. This is no longer sufficient in today’s fast-paced environment. The power and availability of communications systems are rapidly evolving and growing, and organizations need to keep up with shifting expectations.

To make sure they are staying on top of this new business reality, organizations should consider adopting a unified communications solution. As its name suggests, UC provides companies with a singular platform that encompasses a wide variety of services and technologies, thus ensuring that every possible communication and collaboration outlet is made available. One person’s preferred communication channel may be significantly different than someone else’s, and it has become more important than ever for organizations to account for everyone’s tastes via a system that facilitates always-on connectivity.

Of course, as is the case with just about everything else, UC comes with its fair share of challenges. After all, while the concept of unified communications has been around for years in the enterprise, many organizations remain reticent to replace their legacy solutions and implement something new. Still, by understanding the common pitfalls and working to get the most out of their chosen solution, companies can reap the full benefits of UC and place themselves ahead of the competition using improved communication and collaboration capabilities.

What exactly is UC?

Unified communications in its most basic form is a common portal encompassing a wide variety of channels. At many companies, the system used to make phone calls is likely separated from the email client and instant messaging service. This can be hugely detrimental as often employees and others want to quickly and easily switch

between a variety of channels, and this becomes even more cumbersome as the number of unattached communications offerings grows.

However, outside of this very basic definition, experts often disagree on what exactly unified communications really is. In particular, not everyone thinks UC needs to contain the same features. Typically tools like instant messaging, email and voice are included within a UC package, but many solutions will offer far more, including telepresence and videoconferencing. Plus, some UC systems will not even offer more basic functionality like chat. While some of the specifics may differ between companies and providers, ultimately any solution that includes multiple modes of communication within one portal counts as unified communications.

Benefits of UC

When companies make the switch from legacy siloed communications portals to unified communications, they can expect to see a host of benefits. Perhaps the most noteworthy one is that UC is all-encompassing, which is especially key since expectations regarding communications technology have changed so dramatically over the past few years. For instance, think about what tools someone might use to keep in touch with friends and loved ones. Chances are good this person uses email, phone calls, instant messaging and other formats. So, why limit these innovations to just the consumer sphere? Each communication channel has its own set of benefits—for example, chat is great for instantly connecting while videoconferencing recreates in-person meetings without both parties being physically together—and UC provides a way for anyone to choose the best method for the task at hand.

UC is all about flexibility and providing many options. With this kind of system in place, companies no longer need to worry about hampering employee efforts, while staff members always have the communications portal in place that meets their unique needs at the moment. This flexibility and choice is especially key for collaboration. True collaboration can only come when all parties are able to be on the same page as everyone else at all times, and often this can only occur using UC solutions.

For more proof of the benefits of UC, consider this example: Let's say company X drastically needs to get in contact with client Y on a Friday evening. If the company historically relied on just email or phone calls to get in touch with the client, then it is entirely possible that company X will not get a reply until Monday morning. However, with a UC system, the company might be able to use chat or telepresence to reach client Y and resolve the issues in a more timely fashion. This is far from an isolated example, as likely every business has faced a difficult situation that could have been avoided by more effective communication.

In addition, UC solutions are often better equipped to incorporate communications into other apps such as customer relationship management software or enterprise resource planning solutions. Consistently keeping all parties informed of key decisions and actions is often a critical factor in determining the relative success or failure of these investments, and because UC can be easily configured with these in mind, the partnership makes the business as a whole that much more effective. For example, ShoreTel's UC solution can be easily synced with apps like Salesforce.com to make both systems more effective.

Furthermore, companies that lack a central system that is overseen by the business's leaders or IT department risk having their employees seek out their own solutions, as just about all employees need to communicate using next-generation tools. This creates a highly disparate communications environment consisting of numerous unchecked pieces of software that could expose an organization to hackers or compliance audit failures. With one easy-to-use UC solution, business executives can rest easy knowing their employees are using a secure and powerful system to keep everything running instead of an unchecked system of disparate applications.

Who benefits the most from UC?

Ultimately, just about every business can benefit from UC, as all employees regardless of job title and industry need to communicate with others in some fashion over the course of an average week. While customer service representatives at retail firms are one of the more obvious roles that could benefit from UC, everyone from warehouse stockers and food service cashiers to data entry specialists and software developers has to communicate with others as part of their job.

However, one group that is perhaps best suited to reap the benefits of UC are those that work remotely some or all of the time. As anyone who has tried conducting work either at home or anywhere else outside of company headquarters can attest to, one of the most difficult factors to overcome in these scenarios is trying to easily connect with customers and co-workers.



"More and more people are working remotely, they're traveling, they're not sitting in one main corporate headquarters where everybody can just sit in the same room and have a meeting," noted unified communications expert Blair Pleasant in an exclusive interview with ShoreTel. "Being able to collaborate with colleagues and co-workers regardless of where they're located is probably the biggest thing."

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This helps to explain why traveling salespeople and other agents stationed in the field are among the biggest proponents of UC in any enterprise.

"If you look at a salesperson who's out on the road, they can be just as productive when they're traveling and out on the road as when they're in the office," Pleasant stated. "So customers can contact them [and then] they can bring in other [people] like a sales engineer [or a] product expert to interact with the customer, to answer their questions and close the deal faster."

Why don't more companies adopt UC?

Although unified communications can provide companies with innumerable benefits, such configurations are not yet widespread in enterprise environments. One of the biggest barriers to entry for many firms is cost. Not only do companies have to procure the initial system, but often they need to pay to have it installed and optimized, and these costs can quickly add up. For businesses that spent a lot of cash on a legacy system, dispensing with even more money to totally do away with what they have may be an idea that budget-minded C-level executives simply cannot stomach. Even though UC's total cost of ownership is low and it brings many value-added benefits to the enterprise, some firms are guided by those who have incorrect opinions of the technology.

In addition, perhaps more telling is the pervasiveness of the opinion of many company leaders that "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." In this context, C-level executives may be tempted to look out on their current communications technology environment and think that because it looks as it always has, nothing is wrong and therefore nothing needs to be done to update the current setup. While such a line of thinking fails to consider all the factors affecting communications and its effect on the bottom line, it nonetheless is all too common within many industry sectors.

This is one key reason why end user-focused UC systems can be a hard sell. While this class of solutions is great at making employees more efficient, it can sometimes

be difficult to quantify its benefits to CFOs and other C-level executives. Typically time saved is not always measured, and even if it is, a dollar figure may not be attached to it. Organizations can form these calculations to better understand the benefits of UC, although many businesses fail to take this step because outdated mindsets rule the roost.

What does the future look like for UC?

While these ideas preventing the spread of UC may be somewhat prevalent in enterprise environments today, that will likely change dramatically in the coming months and years as UC solutions become more powerful and even more affordable. The benefits of unified communications, including its ability to boost collaboration, are only becoming more well known as time goes on, meaning that it is likely to be found in far more business settings today and five years from now than in years past.

Transparency Market Research predicted in January 2014 that the UC market will be worth \$61.9 billion by 2018, which is a marked increase from 2011 when it was worth \$22.8 billion. In addition, IDC predicted that the UC market would rise from \$26.2 billion in 2013 to \$38 billion by 2016.

Part of this shift will come as unified communications embraces new technology like videoconferencing and mobile devices. Smartphones and tablets now pervade enterprises, and companies need to be sure their chosen solution can be accessed on any device, and from any location. This always-on mentality will also increase the number of features found in a typical UC system, with tools such as telepresence poised to one day become as pervasive as email and chat is today.

"People need to access their communications from whatever device they're using at the time, and UC is definitely helpful for that," Pleasant noted.

Fully embracing cloud-hosted unified communications technology will facilitate these efforts. In the past, if companies were in the market for a UC solution, they would need to procure a system powered by equipment on premises. As the cloud grows in maturity, it is quickly becoming a far more affordable and feasible option for deploying UC. With a cloud-based communications infrastructure, organizations can more easily deploy resources to multiple locations while offsetting maintenance and cost concerns. Cloud computing has not always been seen as the most reliable technology, but that perception is rightfully changing and will continue to shift in the coming months and years.

“Instead of deploying UC premise solutions across all the different branches and locations, they can use a cloud solution which makes it a lot easier to get everybody on board,” Pleasant said.

In order to get on the forefront of unified communications and have a communications system built with the needs of today and tomorrow in mind, companies of all sizes should partner with ShoreTel. An industry leader in all things UC, ShoreTel has helped a wide variety of businesses dismantle outdated communications infrastructure and fully embrace the possibilities that are facilitated by UC. The future will bring numerous changes to how organizations everywhere conduct business, but a quality UC solution from ShoreTel can help businesses of all sizes be prepared for anything the future holds.

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About ShoreTel

ShoreTel is a provider of business communication solutions whose brilliantly simply unified communications platforms, applications and mobile UC solutions promise a new rhythm of workforce engagement and collaboration. With costly complexity eliminated by design from its award winning, all-in-one IP phone system, UC and contact center solution, and its industry leading hosted business phone system, workers enjoy a freedom and self-reliance that other providers can't match. Users have full control to engage and collaborate, no matter the time, place or device, for the lowest cost and demand on IT resources in the industry. ShoreTel is headquartered in Sunnyvale, California, and has regional offices and partners worldwide. For more information, visit shoretel.com or shoretelsky.com

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