

Behind the hype of unification

Multimedia in the workplace means unified communications. The need for unification seems clear enough, but what does it entail for the industry? The challenge is NOT to get advanced services to the mobile phone, but rather to get simple services deployed en masse and integrated behind the firewall.



UNIFIED COMMUNICATION involves all aspects of enterprise communications, mixing voice, video, data, messaging and adding real-time collaboration on top. That's a tall order, so it is important to sort out the hype from the real needs.

After being part of the enterprise communications industry for more than 15 years and living through a myriad of buzzwords and trends, I would say that what is happening now is much more than a trend – it's a fundamental change to the enterprise business as we know it.

The introduction of IP telephony has created exciting new forms of communication. Using IP as the backbone improves employee productivity and increases customer satisfaction.

What is really interesting is that IP and software-based technology does more than enable traditional telephony services in a cost-effective way (which actually was the early unique selling point for IP telephony). It is also the new foundation for how voice services can be used in multiple, single or parallel media streams (voice, video and data), and how they interact with other business applications to simplify and improve the user experience.

This is what unified communication is all about: adapting the best-possible available communication stream between individuals and groups – and thereby speeding up decision-making processes.

For example, you might need to contact someone with specific knowledge or information, but you do not have a name. You may or may not know which department owns the issue and you may know the manager of that department. What do you do? Time is of the essence.

In a unified-communications world, you can easily right-click on a document to communicate with the author or present owner, or you can search the online directory for skills or process ownership instead of names. The information presented to you is always adapted in real time. This means you solely have access to information that is relevant right now.

The best possible resources available to you right now may not be available via voice services, but e-mail or messaging options are presented. This is all controlled via the solutions presence server – the heart and soul of any unified communications solution. The

status information about the user, combined with the user profile and position, is vital to optimizing the communication flow. This is all updated in real time, and triggers can measure the user's physical presence, location, calendar setting, keyboard use or manually set status.

To make this a reality, a vendor or integrator needs to fully understand the customer business, have the ability to rethink and optimize the processes, put together the solutions and integrate the enabling technology. This means selling value based on the ability to translate the technology capabilities to specific customer advantages, as opposed to selling boxes. With some additions, these services are actually quite similar to what the industry has been using to optimize customer relationship management (CRM) solutions in multimedia contact centers.

Not exactly new

Admittedly, this is the “hard-core” way of looking at unified communication. At Voice Con (San Francisco, 2007) I presented Ericsson's strategies and participated in a panel debate with Motorola and Nokia. I was quite surprised by the discussion when “one-number” services (the ability to be available on your office extension regardless of whether you are using your home, office or mobile phone) were presented as a “new” unified communication application. I helped deploy one-number services at the end of the 1990s and always regarded it as a commodity feature in PBXs rather than a new service. But they were right: it is a unifying service that delivers basic value to users, customers and enterprises.

Another area within unified communication is group services, such as video conferencing. You might argue that video conferencing has been available for ages – and that it does not work. I would say that video conferencing using the latest technology is starting to take off. New solutions deliver a high-quality experience for individuals but also for the virtual meeting place, where the experience of an almost real-life meeting has improved dramatically. I am certain the virtual meeting place is here to stay and the experience of virtual presence in a meeting will improve further over time. Perhaps holograms are not that far off either.



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The new technology that enables unified communication solutions, primarily the software part, has the potential to cut across the silos of the traditional telecom industry. This is already happening. Skype is a good example of a software-driven telecom application that has won a lot of traction among the enterprise user community. The key success factors are a good user experience, an “easy-to-use” mentality, and the fact that you do not have to adapt the firewalls at enterprises for individuals to use it in the office. And, of course, it is “free.”

Skype simply delivers “good enough” services for individuals and is fun to use. It is interesting to compare how Skype entered the business domain with the way mobile phones did it in the early 1990s, and BlackBerry’s in the 2000s. They are all services that meet user needs for efficient communication, and can be easily adapted by individual users. It was not corporate policy that required these services – they were ushered in by demand from user communities.

The key word is simplicity

In the area of unified communication you can also find newly established expressions such as Enterprise 2.0 or Web 2.0. I believe these areas are interconnected when it comes to the technology basics. What really differentiates is usage. Enterprise 2.0 is more about communities, social networking and knowledge sharing between individuals within and outside the enterprise, while unified communication is more business-process-centric, creating specific value.

If IP and internet technology are enablers, what is the challenge? Mobility within the enterprise community has boomed in the past decade. Employees use the device they have at hand, which is usually a mobile phone. The issues here are that mobile phones differ greatly and are not yet IP end-to-end. They are also often regarded as personal equipment used for business needs. Simple services such as phone books or presence information for specific individuals can be managed easily, but mobile devices still need client application support to work with back-end enterprise applications.

Developing clients for the huge range of mobile devices is a very difficult task for the industry today. Some application and terminal players have joined forces to put together something that works end to end. But this is more like a showcase with single-device support from one vendor. What is needed is multi-vendor and multi-device support for mobile unified applications in the enterprise sphere. I think things are moving in that direction. The key word here is simplicity. Mobile solutions must be easy to understand, use and deploy. You cannot expect users to change their behavior or go out of their way to make it work. The integration between the enterprise and operator domain must be very easy to establish and should not interfere with existing corporate security policies.

We need control

The challenge for the industry is not to get advanced services to mobile phones, but to get mass deployment of easy-to-use services integrated behind the firewall – reusing available devices to a large

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extent. Players that deliver services with end-to-end control over applications and devices will rapidly gain short-term market share.

In the long term, enterprises need to have the appropriate tools to manage their devices in the same way they manage laptop computers. Initially this means tools that, independent of device type, can support the security policies, manage clients/content and phone services, and encrypt or remotely remove sensitive information. Over time they must also create the necessary control and predictability of mobile cost for voice and data. With this in place, IT managers have the right platform to “roll out” unified communication clients on their fleets of mobile phones.

Today we see a base of IP-enabled enterprises building up. These are already populated to a large extent by mobile employees looking to take the next step into unified communication. The technology behind the services is based on session initiation protocol (SIP), which enables multimedia interaction between two or several end points. Mobile users will be supported by IMS (IP Multimedia Subsystem), a SIP-based standard deployed in the public network or as a subset at the enterprise domain.

Bringing these pieces together is where unified communication technology has its core value for the future. Yes, technology is important, but what is the real key to successfully creating a volume business in this area? An important part of the answer can be found by looking at how the software-driven business succeeded in finding innovative and strong business models by enabling individuals to use the services according to their needs – at the right price and with an “easy-to-use” mentality.



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