

## *Focus on Unified Communications*

### **Needed: Better Communications for Unified Communications**

*Don Van Doren, Vanguard Communications*  
in the September 2007 edition of *VON Magazine*

Unified communications is this decade's CTI or CRM. Every vendor has a product offering with "UC" as a label. While it's great that these capabilities have so much support, it has also led to a lot of confusion in the marketplace. I've seen blogs, vendor white papers, articles in trade magazines, market size studies, and speeches from various podiums about unified communications – and frequently each speaker or author is describing a different concept.

I recently had a discussion with Joe Staples, Interactive Intelligence's Senior Vice President for worldwide marketing. Joe mentioned a study that he had recently seen from IDG and CIO Magazine. Enterprise customers were asked, first, if they were aware of unified communications. 86% reported that they were. When asked to define UC, only a small fraction of the respondents was able to do so. Then the surveyor prompted those who weren't sure with several alternatives. The answers selected were about evenly divided into what I interpret as three different themes:

- UC is the consolidation and centralization of different communications capabilities onto a single platform. This view emphasizes ease of administration and support, simpler comprehensive reporting, and builds on themes of media convergence.
- UC concentrates communications for the individual user. It brings together and makes available many ways that users can communicate with each other into a single interface, enhanced by presence capabilities to show who is available in what way. In this way, UC is a successor to unified messaging. Earlier UM brought together email and voicemail with a single user interface. Now UC adds real time communications to the mix – voice, video, web collaboration, IM – and helps prioritize through presence.
- UC builds communications into applications. This builds on the [www.ucstrategies.com](http://www.ucstrategies.com) theme of UC being "communications integrated to optimize business processes." Today, a telephone call might be initiated by the user in the middle of carrying out some business function. Increasingly in the future, the call (or message) will be triggered by a workflow application to an appropriate, available person when the application determines that communications is the next step in a process.

While each of these themes has merit, there are important differences among them, with critical implications for how UC is perceived, positioned, sold, and implemented within enterprises. The first, centralization, emphasizes ease of communications management and administration along with some direct cost savings. This approach sounds similar to traditional telecomm equipment sales methods and may appeal to some buyers.

The second focuses on ease of use and potential productivity benefits to the individual user. As I wrote last month, the features that UC capabilities have for individual users provide some advantages – making life easier and saving time. But to the extent that these advantages remain

a disaggregated “17 minutes a day” for individual users, it’s difficult to develop the ROI for the corporation. In my opinion, the strength of this second view of UC is that it’s easy to visualize the impact of these innovations. The weakness is that focusing on the personal productivity aspects of UC’s capabilities makes it harder to prove a rigorous business case.

The third approach, integrating communications into business processes is where real value can emerge. We recently reviewed UC opportunities within the workflows of a claims processing group. In 63 places, communications issues caused delays or extra steps. Many of them could be reduced or eliminated through UC capabilities, eliminating roughly a quarter of the previous overall processing time. It turns out that there is a direct correlation between the amount of time taken to pay a claim and the settlement amount. Speed matters, and the value of faster processing through reduced payouts is huge. We see this pattern of opportunity through process improvement over and over again in many companies in many different kinds of businesses.

All of this matters. ROI justification is currently perceived by many to be a challenge. That may be true if UC is seen as just telecom savings (the first theme) or individual productivity (the second). But there is great potential for changing how business operates with the third view.

We in the industry need to make sure that the value of UC is better communicated. How we talk about it, how we think about it, and where we look for the benefits will have an important bearing on its success of these important capabilities.

*Don Van Doren is Principal of UniComm Consulting, an independent UC consulting firm, and a co-founder of [www.ucstrategies.com](http://www.ucstrategies.com). Don is also President of Vanguard Communications. Contact Don at [dvandoren@unicommconsulting.com](mailto:dvandoren@unicommconsulting.com).*