

Building Communications into Business Processes

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Many of the benefits trumpeted by UC suppliers involve personal productivity. Why? These impacts are easy to visualize — position the cursor over a document author's name and presence-enabled software will show you the best way to reach him or her right now. While such capabilities are fun to do and certainly add some efficiency, I think it's difficult to build a justification in ways that will make CFOs sit up and take notice. What's missing is the "So what?" of reaching that author immediately. What's the real bottom-line impact?

More significant benefits of UC occur when communication capabilities are integrated directly into workflows and business processes. As one example, let's consider how contact centers will use UC to improve interactions with customers and business partners.

Contact centers use ACDs to organize calls into skills-based queues. Contact management systems display previous customer interactions. Various data systems help agents answer callers' questions. Calls can be escalated within the contact center to get to second tier support. One reason that these systems, tools, and hierarchies have been developed is to achieve first-call resolution (FCR). The benefits are both lower costs and greater caller satisfaction.

But contact centers are becoming more strategic to companies, and in many cases, the interactions are becoming more complex. Increasingly, to achieve first-call resolution requires reaching for expertise outside the center itself. While contact centers have developed effective outward focused systems to interact with callers, there haven't been comparable capabilities to connect to experts in other departments within the company. Such experts could be a specialist in risk underwriting for an insurance firm, the design engineers who understand a complex medical system, a lead industry analyst in an investment management company, or the Tier-3 technical support staff. These experts are usually not part of the contact center, and they have responsibilities beyond waiting for the phone to ring. But in defined situations, they are needed to help resolve a situation. And if the goal is first-call resolution, they need to be able to be accessed right now.

The challenge is in knowing which experts outside the center are available. This is where well-designed presence-based UC systems will come into play. Presence will be set automatically so that the experts don't need to constantly change their availability status, and will vary based on which customer and what sort of expertise is needed. In addition, the concept of presence will extend to not only individuals but to teams of people. Today's IM buddy lists show individual availability, but what's needed isn't Joe, but a nurse like Joe with specific expertise. At the same time, ACD-like queuing will appear outside the contact center, so that departmental experts are extensions of the call center queues. The effect is to use UC to build a communication link to the expert outside the center directly into the business process of answering a caller's request.

What if we go further? If presence can be used to link to internal resources in real time, can we take advantage of the same functionality to extend real-time communications outside the

company? This is the goal of “federation” between systems – to enable the sharing of presence information across system boundaries. There would seem to be clear advantages in such an opportunity, certainly to facilitate communications among business partners in a supply chain, and possibly directly with customers. This might happen first in business-to-business customer relationships, or possibly with selected high-value customers in businesses such as investment management where real-time communication has great value. This could become a two-way communication link – companies reaching out to their partners and customers, but also the ability for outsiders to reach directly into the company experts they need as well.

There are many issues that have to be addressed for such capabilities to evolve. Robust federation is a part of it, but security and privacy concerns pose formidable obstacles, too. Still, the possibility for UC to speed communications between a company and its customers opens new ways to reduce information cycle time. The opportunity is to tightly integrate communications directly into the business processes. That’s how UC is going to show results that the CFO can understand and appreciate.

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