

Focus on Unified Communications

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This month begins a new column, replacing the one I've written on contact centers. There are several reasons for this shift. First, there are strong connections between what happens in contact centers and in the promise of unified communications. Second, there is intense industry focus on UC and its impact on enterprise communications functionality. Third, IP enables the full promise of UC. And finally, there will be strategy, design, and implementation challenges to successfully bring UC's promise to businesses. Let's look at each of these.

Contact Centers as "Early UC". The industry information portal www.ucstrategies.com defines UC as "communications integrated to optimize business processes." That's exactly what contact centers have been doing for years - linking people, processes, communications, and systems in an integrated process to efficiently and effectively to handle external calls and contacts into a company.

In contrast, most internal communications isn't directly built into business processes. Need to get an answer to something you're working on? Stop what you're doing, look up a number, call the person, and leave a voice message, and maybe hear back sometime. IM provides a first step to shortcut this maze. But much more is coming, both by turning externally focused techniques of contact centers (queuing, skills) internally, and by harnessing more extensive presence capabilities that are now emerging.

Industry Focus. It's hard to pick up a technology oriented publication and not find a reference to UC products and plans. Three reasons drive this focus. First, many companies are betting significant parts of their business on UC. In the past year, Cisco has re-branded many of its communications products under a "unified communications" label. Nortel and Microsoft have formed the "Innovative Communications Alliance" to promote a "shared vision of the future of business communications." Avaya has designated "communications enabled business process" as a key foundation element of its products.

Second, UC capabilities are coming to market from four separate types of suppliers:

- Traditional business communications suppliers - Avaya, Nortel, Mitel, Siemens, and others.
- Desktop software suppliers are baking communications into their product offerings to enhance their functionality. IBM's Sametime and Microsoft's OCS are the most obvious examples of strong product offerings that incorporate UC functionality.
- The application providers such as Oracle, BEA, and SAP also understand that integrating communications into their product offerings makes them more effective business work tools.
- The portal providers, such as Yahoo, AOL, and Google, have significant IM capabilities in both public networks and private enterprise offerings.

Add to this the mobility players, such as RIM, and potential entry by the network providers, and we see the emergence of a real battle for market control.

IP Enhancements. While some of UC's capabilities can be delivered through traditional TDM channels, IP makes most of this functionality easier or less expensive. Some capabilities, such as presence-enabled, instant conferencing for internal collaboration, are only practical through IPT. You need IPT to extend this functionality to, say, all the partner companies in a supply chain.

Realizing Enterprise Opportunities. A decade ago, the industry started talking about voice and data "convergence" and the benefits it would bring. Many of these infrastructure benefits weren't very tangible to enterprise planners. UC's potential is to identify applications in which communications are integrated into business processes. However, such implementations require getting into the details of these processes and identifying how UC will really create change.

We have significant opportunities for many false starts. We have seen some stumbles already:

- Many assume that UC is just souped-up unified messaging. While messaging is a component, UC just views it as just one of a number of relevant channels. Much of UC involves real-time, not non-simultaneous, communication.
- Some equate presence with today's IM. IM is one means of getting an indication of the availability of another individual. But it's a crude tool at best, and doesn't start to touch the federated capabilities across multiple media that are envisioned by industry planners.
- Those promoting UC are continually mixing up features, advantages, and benefits that UC will bring. There is a real risk that UC will never achieve its potential if it is sold as an individual productivity tool, which is an advantage, not a benefit.

This Column. UC has potent capabilities to change how businesses operate, but only if it is conceived, brought to market, and implemented in ways that enable it to reach that potential. Over the coming months, this column will examine these issues and opportunities, track major supplier initiatives, and look at successes and failures in enterprise implementations. Welcome!

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