

Unified Communications Terminology Wars

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A couple of months ago I wrote about the "battle lines" that are being drawn up by different suppliers approaching the unified communications market from different directions. But another, unfortunate, battle is also being waged -- that of terminology. Because, UC has become such a popular notion, it seems everybody is clamoring to get on the bandwagon. And all the pushing and shoving is leading to market confusion.

One of the ways this confusion emerges is when companies are asked where they are on the way to adopting UC in their operations. A recent Wainhouse Research study reported that 30% of the enterprises surveyed claimed to have a UC strategy in place. The same study showed that suppliers claim that many enterprises have already made their UC purchase decisions.

In our talks with enterprise customers, we frequently hear statements that would lead to a similar conclusion. Companies that have purchased a new PBX system or replaced their aging voice mail infrastructure often talk about how they have "moved to UC". Some companies have decided to sanction the use of public IM systems such as AIM or Windows Live Messenger, or to implement a corporate IM system. It's not hard to imagine those same companies feeling that, yes, they have their UC strategy well in hand.

Let me say, as gently as possible, that this is nonsense. Unified communications is far more than deciding on an IM approach, or putting in the next-generation voice mail system, or PBX. While these systems certainly have a role in the evolving UC environment, they don't constitute a UC strategy.

Part of the problem is that many vendors are now positioning their product lines as "UC". A number of years back, Avaya started positioning its unified messaging products as "unified communications". Current voicemail companies, such as Adomo and AVST, talk about their UC products. It's not surprising that surveys have shown that almost a third of the respondents believe that unified communications is nothing more than unified messaging. And, of course, Cisco has been branding great swathes of its product line under the unified communications banner. Not surprising that an enterprise customer would think they've purchased a UC system. It says so right on the box it came in.

Avaya is muddying the water in a different way. They draw a distinction between "UC" and "CEBP" or communications enabled business processes. In their view, UC is initiated by a person launching a communications, and CEBP is a communication initiated by a business process. In other words, they are differentiating what causes a communication to occur irrespective of the outcome or the impact on the business. In my view, I find it difficult to understand how you can communications-enable a business process without the concepts of unified communications.

I feel it's much more important to focus on where the benefit is. In the taxonomy we use at UniComm Consulting, unified communications is the umbrella term. Within UC, an application where the individual user benefits (saving XX minutes per day) is "personal productivity." An application where the benefit accrues to the corporation usually happens through a change in the workflow, which we call "business process enhancement". It turns out that the benefits are typically far greater in the latter situation than the former, which is why we encourage our clients not to stop at the personal productivity applications.

I believe that it's important to move toward consistent terminology. Part of building this industry is being able to communicate effectively among the participants, so that we can share information and experiences. Part of the reason that I feel this is important is because of unified communications' capability to fundamentally change how businesses work. UC is not just a technology, or a system, or a product. Ultimately, it is a transformative way of thinking about how we communicate. In the future we will no longer have communications as a separate, discrete step of stopping what we are doing to pick up the phone to talk to someone. Rather, communications will become an integral part of virtually every application and process we encounter. The impact will be to remove today's subtle barriers that arise from communications inefficiencies.

But to achieve that vision will take work on the part of suppliers and enterprises working together to develop the applications and to understand the best implementation approaches. Consistent language will facilitate that goal.