

Unified Communications and Contact Centers

Don Van Doren, Vanguard Communications
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I received a letter from a reader wondering about this column's recent number of articles about unified communications (UC). The reason is straightforward. First, contact centers are an existing demonstration of the potential power of UC within our businesses. Second, UC capabilities have the potential to dramatically extend our contact centers' reach and improve our companies' performance. Third, UC concepts are going to be incorporated into the underpinnings of how most communications will be done in the future. Let's look at the first two issues.

There is a lot of flutter in typical UC presentations about the neat features that enable "anywhere, anytime, any media access." In my opinion, these easy-to-understand features are not what UC is all about. In general, these sorts of capabilities make it easier for someone to do their work. But claims for benefits based on this functionality have the same hollow ring as the "we can save 15 minutes per day of every user" messages that periodically float out of vendors' marketing departments.

The real benefits of UC are a result of integrating communications capabilities directly into business processes. That means building the communications links directly into a workflow, to eliminate the discontinuity that often happens when, for example, someone reaches for a telephone to complete the next step in a defined process. In this situation, UC provides tools to enable the knowledge worker to identify who is available now in what way to get the next workflow step completed.

But "identifying how someone is available" through a presence-enabled display on your personal communication device (or whatever a phone will be called) is not a benefit. That's a feature. The benefit comes from translating that feature into its impact on the business. Frequently, the benefit is "reduced cycle time" or "increased customer satisfaction" or "reduced headcount" or other similar measures that can more directly be shown to affect the company's bottom line.

Contact centers have evolved specialized communications systems to answer, route, and queue calls, and to collect and report statistics about how these calls were being handled. These ACDs were coupled with trained staff, technology to access to relevant information or business systems, and business processes and workflows. The result was to streamline what previously had been a cumbersome and inefficient way of dealing with customer calls. Over the years, we've added other forms of contact, and systems to schedule staff, assess quality, provide information and assistance, and enable self-service. This collection of systems, people, and processes work together to enable a much more effective and efficient way to sell tickets, provide technical support, or whatever business activity needed to be accomplished.

I see contact centers as being an early example of what unified communications' goal should be – communications integrated to optimize a business process. And, the results from successful contact center implementations around the globe show just how dramatic the bottom-line benefits can be to an enterprise.

Here's the second reason I've focused on UC in these columns. While contact centers have done a great job at harnessing people, technology, processes, and communications to get a job done, the focus has been external. While the external communications have been streamlined, the internal communications are generally a mess.

The most efficient internal operations tend to be places where there are well-defined workflows and processes in place. But for a lot of the mobile workers, road warriors, and knowledge workers, it's tough to get in touch with who you need when you need it. UC holds the potential for improvement. For example, we have developed techniques to help translate UC's features into real corporate benefits for internal communications among these groups of workers.

Today, the customer contact generally stops with the contact center. But in many businesses, that isn't sufficient to really get the job done. UC will help make contact centers even more effective by linking the externally focused communications systems to improved ways to reach internally to access those workers when needed. The first, most obvious example of the benefits available is the impact of increasing first call resolution, by connecting in real time to an internal expert needed to resolve a caller's issue.

Contact center capabilities are also going to be increasingly turned to support internal applications. There are dozens of situations in which it would be helpful to queue calls for internal experts who have a particular "skill." Or times when it would be helpful to measure statistics typically tracked in call centers. In many ways, we will see capabilities originally developed for the contact center migrating to internal applications in the future.

Enterprises and vendors are looking for ways to show the benefits of unified communications. Contact centers provide some guidance. By integrating communications into the business process of providing for customer interaction, dramatic benefits can be demonstrated. And, properly implemented, the capabilities of UC will further extend the contact center's value.

Don Van Doren is Principal of UniComm Consulting, an independent UC consulting firm, and a co-founder of www.ucstrategies.com. Don is also President of Vanguard Communications. Contact Don at dvandoren@unicommconsulting.com.