

Unified Communications... Keeping the Customer in the Equation

Unified Communications - Talk of the Town

Everyone is talking about unified communications. But, how they are defining it and why they are considering implementing it varies from enterprise to enterprise. Many unified communications strategies only focus on using the applications, like presence, voice integration, and collaboration to improve employee productivity. There's more to unified communications than just improving productivity, though. Enterprises should also be focusing on communications—enabling its customer-facing process, such as service, collections and sales to ensure they are fully leveraging the value that unified communications can provide.

Fortunately, enterprises need look no further than their contact centers for inspiration. Over time, the contact center has developed the disciplines that enterprises can apply to their unified communications strategy to ensure that the customer is part of the equation. By applying processes, such as routing, reporting, queuing, workflow, workforce management and scheduling, monitoring, training and coaching across all customer-facing employees - even enterprise-based knowledge workers, companies can ensure that their unified communications strategy will bring them the desired results of both improved productivity and satisfied customers.

The goal of this paper is to highlight how unified communications will have the most relevance if it is couched in terms of not just generically improving communications but in having the focus of improvement be the communications between organizations and their *customers*.



What is Unified Communications?

Before a business or organization can think about whether it should adopt unified communications, it would be helpful to have a common understanding of what people mean when they use the term.

- Some think of unified communications as the successor to unified messaging. Ten years ago voicemail began evolving to unified messaging when technology became available to combine access to voicemail, email and fax messages in a simpler way. With the recently added elements of presence and instant messaging, some think of unified communications as the next logical progression of unified messaging.
- Since unified communications mobility solutions and unified communications are often discussed together, some believe UC is a solution best suited to the needs of traveling executives.
- Others view unified communications as just a fancy term for IP Telephony.

Recognizing that definitions can morph over time, for the purposes of this paper we defer to a recent August 2007 Gartner Group report on the topic for their current view. "Unified communications offer the ability to significantly improve how individuals, groups and companies interact and perform." ¹ An improved ability to interact and perform is dependent on the use of technology. Similar to analyst firm Forrester Research ², we will include under our umbrella of unified communications the following communications and collaborations technologies:

- **Communication applications:** Business telephony, mobile devices, audio and video, unified messaging, desktop call control.
- **Collaboration applications:** Email, calendars, IM and presence, web conferencing, directory integration.

Understanding what technologies make up unified communications, while a necessary component of evaluating unified communications' usefulness for a given organization, is not sufficient. Gartner (and others) point out that the importance of unified communications is that it offers a method to integrate communication functions directly with business applications. Gartner calls this capability "communications-enabled business processes." ³

Unified communications describes the convergence between enterprise information technology applications and communications solutions, which includes unified messaging, collaboration and interaction systems. Most importantly, it provides real-time and near real-time communications. The possibilities that unified communications offers and the value it could bring to businesses is clearly worth exploring.

If Unified Communications is the Answer, What is the Question?

What is the promise of unified communications? Why are mega-companies like Microsoft and IBM extolling its virtues? Unified communications is seen as having the potential to address perennial issues for all types of organizations, from multi-national corporations to single site, small businesses. The first of these is increasing productivity. Companies are constantly being challenged to do more with less, to maximize every resource.

Art Rosenberg, well-known unified communications industry expert and author of a regular column, The Unified View, offers a framework for discussing the ways that productivity is enhanced by unified communications. He posits that there are two levels of benefit that can be realized:

- Micro-productivity refers to the fact that individual users can save time doing their jobs by accessing both information and people more flexibly and faster. Using unified communications, users are able to switch more easily from merely leaving a message to real-time instant messaging, from person-to-person voice calls to multi-party voice and video conferencing. These capabilities become more effective as "multimodal" endpoint devices become commonplace or as mobile handheld devices (smart phones), and contact initiators can exploit presence management to determine recipient availability before wasting their time in failed real-time contact attempts.

- Macro-productivity refers to the ability to achieve greater business process (task) performance by all involved individual users as a group. Theoretically, the more people involved in a business process that can realize micro-productivity through unified communications, the greater the level of macro-productivity performance that can be achieved by the business process.

It follows then that the value of unified communications to the enterprise in improving productivity will be highly dependent upon both the role of individual users and the value of the business processes in which they participate.

A second pervasive goal of companies is to take the guesswork out of operations by creating and implementing clear, streamlined processes. CEOs, CIOs, and COOs alike look to “greenlight” projects that will have direct impact on the bottom line, such as:

- A simplified contract-to-order process.
- The elimination of time-consuming tasks in the purchase of materials.
- Cutting, even completely eliminating, order rejections.

While improving productivity and streamlining processes can be viewed as continuing challenges, enhancing the customer experience has only more recently been recognized for its ability to differentiate excellent companies from the merely good. James Allen, Frederick F. Reichheld, and Barney Hamilton, in an article entitled *The Three “Ds” of Customer Experience* say that companies whose customers believe they deliver a superior customer experience have the following characteristics:

- They design the right offers and experiences for the right customers.
- They deliver these propositions by focusing the entire company on them with an emphasis on cross-functional collaboration.
- They develop their capabilities to please customers again and again.

While enhanced communications could no doubt have value in each of these areas, it is the deliver attribute that can most clearly be impacted by improved communications both within and across businesses united in a common goal to address a set of customer requirements. Businesses and consumers both gain when knowledge workers can be part of the enterprise pool of customer-facing employees to best address consumer demands. High-value sales or service interactions can be addressed directly by the appropriate employee - no matter their location - based on availability. Finally, idle time of knowledge workers can be harnessed to manage increased volumes of interactions without the need for additional hiring.

Integrating customer information gathered across the entire enterprise - from accounting to sales, from engineering to shipping - enables the organization to engage with the customer and provide the high level of customer service that result in the elusive ideal customer experience.

So, again, revisiting the original question - why unified communications? Because there is an increasing body of evidence that the technologies of unified communications, applied with the goal of communications-enabling businesses processes, can have a direct impact on the value a company can deliver to its employees, to its customers, and ultimately to its shareholders. Improving productivity and streamlining processes can make it easier for a customer company to deliver the ideal customer experience.

The Contact Center: A Logical Starting Point

While some of the most talked about drivers for businesses to adopt a unified communications strategy have been the desire for increased productivity and streamlined processes, success will ultimately be measured in terms of the customer experience. If one combines the need for multiple communications methods with the notion of communications-enabled business process, it is clear to see that contact centers, by their definition, are at the heart of unified communications. Contact centers were created to address a specific set of *customer-facing business processes*.

Of course, initially, this was accomplished using the very simplest of communications and collaboration methods, namely agent-assisted calls and self service technologies. Increasingly, particularly since the advent of standards-based communications protocols like IP and SIP, contact centers are using more of the technologies being broadly categorized as unified communications, such as email, IM, and calendars. As such, they have been communications-enabling their customer service, collections and sales business processes for years. Contact centers already have the experience that the enterprise can leverage.

A logical way to think about a unified communications deployment is to begin with how advanced communications technologies can be applied to customer communications practices in the contact center. This is where the most direct impact to company results will be seen.

Why consider the contact center as the starting point for unified communications deployment? Because the contact center already has experience communications-enabling the business processes and it would be logical to extend their lessons learned out to the enterprise.

For example, as part of the unified communications strategy, companies are looking closely at how capabilities, like presence and multimodal communications could help achieve an improved customer experience. Once again the contact center already has some experience with concepts like presence. In fact, every agent, every day, logs in and establishes that they are ready to take calls by communicating their presence. They're letting the systems know, whether it's a dialer or an ACD, that they are available and they're ready. So this idea of presence is certainly not brand new to the contact center, but this idea of presence is new to the rest of the enterprise.

So, essentially, the contact center provides the discipline for unified communications since it has already defined the processes required to leverage knowledge workers from across the enterprise. Who are these so-called knowledge workers? Definitions vary, but Dominique Goupil, CEO of FileMaker, Inc., offers this characterization. ⁴

"Knowledge workers appear as employees, partners, contractors, freelancers and consultants. Some are mobile, working in hotels, at airports and on the road. Others are stationary, working from home, in office buildings or manufacturing facilities. They populate all industries and job descriptions, from assembly line workers to doctors and scientists."

Unified communications can be thought of as a way to easily extend customer contact to these knowledge workers - where appropriate - the structure that routing, reporting, queuing, workflow, workforce management, scheduling, monitoring, training and coaching have already brought to the contact center. The challenge is to bring the discipline honed in the contact center to a larger portion of the business.

Extending Quality Customer Service across the Enterprise

Unified communications can be thought of as enabling enterprises to enrich the customer experience with the knowledge and expertise that non-traditional agents can offer, while still allowing the contact center to retain control of interactions. Customer transactions can become a collaboration between the contact center and the rest of the enterprise, and using the tools already available, the contact center can manage the entire interaction.

How specifically can contact center technology be applied within the broader context of unified communications?

- Call routing software can determine if a customer interaction should be handled via chat, email or requires a live assisted call - using various criteria, such as the lifetime value of the customer.
- The contact center can provide the tools to schedule knowledge workers, or determine availability to support customer interactions using rich presence, integrated with calendaring. The notion of presence, while relatively new for enterprise knowledge workers, is not new to the contact center. For decades contact center software has managed agent state from sign-in to sign-out.

- Interactions among customers, contact center agents and knowledge workers can be monitored, enabling a significant improvement in customer service.

The value that this way of thinking about unified communications and contact centers will bring to the enterprise are easy to envision:

- **Customer Service:** A customer calls into the product support desk with an unusual problem. The agent, while capable, has never seen this problem before and the knowledge database doesn't address it. The agent can initiate a request to find an available engineer with knowledge in this particular area. The contact center goes through its knowledge base of experts and finds a list, most of whom are not agents, and begins to check their availability according to their presence state. When an available expert is found, the connection is established according to the media type the expert is available to use. In this case, the expert is on a conference call but available for an instant message. The agent can pass along the inquiry to the expert, but the expert needs more information from the customer. Rather than acting as an intermediate, the agent invites the expert into the call by converting the customer's audio to text for the expert to see. The expert decides to feed the responses to the agent rather than use TTS, so he IM's the solution to the agent and completes the inquiry.
- **Sales:** The contact center gets a lead about a person interested in a new auto insurance policy. The contact center calls the prospective customer and provides them with all of the information they need to make a decision. However, the customer has a question about a specific line item in the policy that the agent can't answer. The agent sees that an expert is available via chat and he sends a quick message, receives his answer almost immediately, along with a document that the insurance expert has attached to the chat message. As a result, the agent is able to make the sale in one call and the customer is pleased with his first interaction with the insurance company, which could lend itself to creating life-long customer loyalty.
- **Collections:** An at-home agent calls a customer about an outstanding bill, but the customer has questions about a couple of the items on the bill. The agent can address two of the items, but isn't sure about the 3rd item on the bill. She determines that one of the accounts billable employees is available for phone calls and conferences in the accounting employee who is located in another part of the country. She explains the situation and the accountant is able to easily explain the line item. The customer is satisfied with the response and promises to send a check that day to pay the entire bill.

These vignettes highlight how the corporate assets of traditional contact center employees, practices and technologies can be further leveraged throughout the enterprise with the addition of unified communications technologies like presence, mobility and multimodal communications. And, most importantly, the contact center, which has the greatest understanding of customer interaction best practices and has the tools to measure satisfaction, retains control of the customer experience.

A Concept, Not a Technology

What should be clear at this point is that unified communications is not a *thing*, provided by a single vendor. Instead unified communications is a way of approaching how communications capabilities can help streamline processes to achieve business goals. The concept relies on bridges being built among many types of enterprise applications and communications capabilities.

Thought of in this manner, it belies common sense to believe that a single vendor can provide all of the components necessary to help a company successfully execute a unified communications strategy. There are, however, attributes that companies can look for, in fact, should demand, in their technology partners that will ease the creation of a successful unified communications plan. In order to allow an enterprise to create unified communications solutions designed to work with its own set of applications and technologies, adherence to open standards is key.

For example, choosing communications solutions built using Session Initiation Protocol (SIP), applied without proprietary extensions, can ensure that organizations are not thwarted in their desire to choose solution components from multiple vendors. With SIP, enterprises continue to have a choice: to install multiple applications from a single vendor or have the option to incorporate best-of-breed products.

First Steps toward Building a Unified Communications Strategy

Given that unified communications is a concept, a way of thinking about how to bring about positive change for your business; it's obviously *not* about sending out a request for proposal and selecting the least cost supplier. Diligent consideration of the factors below will help make for a unified communications strategy and deployment that delivers measurable business benefits.

- Objectively assess your business challenges.
- Evaluate how the features and benefits unified communications brings can deliver on your business goals.
- Develop a strategy that starts with the customer and adds other company organizations based on the measurable contribution that can be made by including them in the communications chain with customers and other types of business partners.
- Determine which contact center processes and disciplines could readily and effectively be extended to improve the overall customer experience.
- Ensure that the contact center technology partner you choose to work with as you explore unified communications has open standards as a core value.
- Bring in complementary technologies and partners as needed to ensure your success.

By considering all of the above as companies develop unified communications strategies, they can ensure it will yield the greatest results for the business, including improving agent productivity, increasing customer satisfaction and ultimately improving the top and bottom lines. But, the biggest key is always keeping customers at the core of the strategy and applying established contact center technologies, processes and disciplines to ensure the best results.

Notes

1. *Magic Quadrant for Unified Communications*, 2007, August 20 2007, Bern Elliot.
2. *How to Determine If Unified Communications Is Right for Your Business*, June 7, 2007, Elizabeth Herrell.
3. *The Three "Ds" of Customer Experience*, Harvard Business School Working Knowledge, November 2005.
4. *Knowledge workgroups: Knowledge workers, new workgroups and new demands for information management*. White Paper at FileMaker. Dominique Goupil (2002).

About Aspect Software

Aspect Software, Inc. founded the contact center industry and is now the world's largest company solely focused on providing session initiation protocol (SIP)-based Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and traditional voice-based products and services for customer service, collections, and sales and telemarketing business processes. Each day, Aspect Software powers more than 125 million customer-company interactions at thousands of in-house and outsourced contact centers around the globe. Its trusted Signature product line offers automatic call distributors (ACDs), dialers, voice portals and computer telephony integration (CTI). The company's leading Contact Center Performance Optimization product line provides workforce management, quality management, performance management and campaign management applications. And, its pioneering Aspect® Unified IP™ product delivers a comprehensive, multichannel solution. Headquartered in Chelmsford, Mass., Aspect Software has operations across the Americas, Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia Pacific. For more information, visit www.aspect.com.

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