

UNIFIED COMMUNICATIONS: DIFFERENT APPROACHES FOR DIFFERENT TYPES OF ENTERPRISES

Fernando Almeida¹, José Oliveira², José Cruz¹

¹ Faculty of Engineering of University of Porto

Rua Dr^o Roberto Frias s/n, 4200-465 Porto, Portugal

² Faculty of Economics of University of Porto and INESC Porto

Rua Dr^o Roberto Frias 378, 4200-465 Porto, Portugal

ABSTRACT

Unified communications (UC) have the potential to dramatically simplify and improve enterprise communications, reducing costs and improving revenue opportunities. By integrating various forms of communications, such as voice, video, instant messaging, conferencing, presence and voicemail, individuals and groups can more effectively control and manage their inbound and outbound communications sessions. However, Large Enterprises (LE) and Small & Medium Enterprises (SMEs) have a diverse perspective look of UC and different needs. In this paper we will analyze the reasons that motivate the business leaders to introduce unified communications and we will study with detail the large enterprises and SMEs approach for the implementation of a unified communications solution.

KEYWORDS

Unified communications, SMEs, collaboration, information technologies.

1. INTRODUCTION

An organization's ability to effectively communicate and collaborate with a broad range of interested parties is increasingly becoming a key business differentiator. Used effectively, unified communications and collaboration strategies, applications and infrastructure enable organizations to add value to a range of core business processes, realize significant operational benefits, and achieve quantifiable bottom-line savings.

However, the explosion in the multiplicity of communications channels often results in added complexity that undermines the potential benefits of an always-on, increasingly connected and a global business environment. Productivity can suffer due to the difficulties associated with contacting people via multiple communications channels and the inability of current infrastructure to effectively encourage and facilitate collaborative working (Lazar, 2007). The phenomenon of sending multiple message versions in the hope of ensuring contact overburdens IT infrastructure and can compromise effective data storage compliance obligations. At the same time, an individual's productivity, work/life balance and job satisfaction can be diminished due to the stress of handling, managing and responding to an increasingly onerous communications environment (Smith, 2006).

As global business activities shift from centralized to decentralized working environments, gravitate from single to multi-channel interactions, and implement and grow business ecosystems and value networks that operate outside of the traditional organization confines, a unified approach to communications and collaboration is becoming essential for success. Developments that can simplify or eradicate the unwanted complexity of modern communications are increasingly regarded as a source of competitive advantage. By simplifying and rationalizing communications and collaboration resources, organizations can directly benefit from new agility, improved collaborative working capabilities, and a more rapid response to changing market conditions. With a unified approach to communications and collaboration organizations become better equipped to respond to the challenges and demands of today's global economy and increasing customer expectation. Unified communications is not a product that can be purchased off the shelf. It is the bringing

together of technologies and processes to enable organizations with capabilities and speed that they did not previously have. This is accomplished through the seamless merging of converged network infrastructures, end-user network devices, communication/collaboration technologies, presence and location services, and application integration. The communications interface is not restricted to clients on specific end-user devices, but can also be embedded in business applications via a service-oriented architecture. Therefore, communications can be launched from within any enabled application in which the user is working.

Unified communications is the combination of these technology components in a way that enhances collaboration dramatically and thus accelerates the efficiency of business processes (Bailey, 2007).

2. UNIFIED COMMUNICATIONS APPROACH

2.1 Reasons for the need of unified communications

Today's business leaders understand they must respond rapidly to changing environments, to meet customer demands and improve profitability. Business communications have become more complex, and despite investments in technology, such as instant messaging and mobile devices, companies still have difficulties in contacting key decision-makers in a timely manner. To maintain a competitive edge and grow profitability, companies need to respond more quickly to their employees and customers and must avoid communication obstructions.

For many organizations there are now more employees who work away from the headquarters than those who are stationary. This increases the difficulty of reaching others when needed, which causes work delays during times of critical decisions. Typically, companies can face the following troubles: inability to reach mobile and remote workforce slows down decisions; dispersed workgroups lack the ability to initiate spontaneous collaboration; workers' lack visibility into the availability of a co-worker, key decision-makers' whereabouts; scheduling issues for collaborative work sessions (Boyd, 2008).

Companies are often unaware of the high cost to their business caused by delayed communications that are considered a normal part of the workday. According to a recent Forrester survey of IT decision-makers, more than 50% of the companies' knowledge workers experience project delays on a weekly basis due to the inability to reach key decision-makers (Forrester, 2008).

The cost of business caused by communication delays can be substantial. Workers experience frustration when they cannot continue a project without proper approvals. Even more significant is that the project actually comes to a complete halt, as reported by 25% of survey respondents, when work teams wait to receive necessary approvals. An additional 63% of IT decision-makers indicated that these delays caused work to slowdown, which obviously impacts time to market (Forrester, 2008).

The Unified Communications approach comes to bring some answers to these open issues and represents a new paradigm for employee communications. Unified communication and collaboration (UCC) applications simplify communications and allow employees to reach each other. Unified communications offer several benefits that can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Benefits of Unified Communications and Collaboration solutions (Forrester, 2008)

| Major benefits of UCC solutions | | |
|--|------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Simpler collaboration, improved productivity | Speed to market | Real-time response |
| Enhancing value | Cost savings | Driving competitiveness |
| Effective management of remote workers | Empowering individuals | Communicating on a global scale |

While it is undeniable that UCC solutions can lead to significant cost savings, their ability to add value to a range of business processes and facilitate more effective collaborative working is just as important. By providing an integrated portfolio of capabilities and services, UCC solutions enable organizations to increase business agility and leverage increasingly dynamic and flexible working practices. It enables dispersed project teams and remote workers to embrace and develop value-added horizontal relationships with customers, suppliers and business partners and realize more effective outcomes from mergers and acquisitions. By ensuring that the right person can be easily reached at the right time, business agility is

improved, wasted time is minimized and the increasing IT infrastructure burden created by multiple message versions is alleviated (Ascierto, 2007).

2.2 Large Enterprises and SMEs Approach for UCs

According to EVUA, a non-profit and global ICT network group for multinational companies, large enterprises have a high level of awareness of unified communications. A 2007 EVUA survey, for example, found that nearly all enterprises had ambitious plans for significant UC deployments. Over 65% surveyed were deploying Web and collaborative applications, and 90% expected to have Instant Messaging (IM) in place by the end of 2008 (Taylor, 2008). In contrast, SMEs across Europe are much more divided on the subject, which is somewhat expected from such a diverse customer base. While nearly 30% of SMEs are deploying UC in some form, another 30% have no plans at all. They are often confused between unified messaging (UM) and UC and tend to take them to mean similar things (Taylor, 2008).

Large enterprises tend to see UC as a strategic move towards developing new workflow patterns, improving business processes, increasing collaboration through virtual teams and reducing human latency times through applications such as IM and presence. According to Ira Herman, co-CEO of Logic IT Consulting, presence systems can play a crucial role in an SME by allowing employees to control the preferred means of communication based on current status whether they are available, travelling, working on project, in a meeting, etc. (Gain, 2008). On the other side, SMEs are more tactical in their approach. SMEs tend to focus less on the long-term roadmap than they do on bottom line price and cost-savings. The SME approach to UC is driven by short-term gains in how they can improve a business process (e.g., be more responsive to customers). They are looking for less complex solutions that are “plug and play” and easy to manage, and there is a much closer link between their business verticals and the types of point products they will deploy.

The most part of UC deployments within large enterprises tend to focus around IP PBX investments. Whether the service is managed by a service provider or implemented in-house the choice of approach is heavily influenced by existing equipment. On the other side, SMEs tend to be very diverse in their deployments. A typical company could deploy voice over broadband (e.g., cable or DSL), managed/unmanaged IP PBX, hosted IP Centrex or SIP trunking (Arnold, 2008). As large enterprises tend to have sizeable IT budgets, as well as ample internal resources and expertise on a number of areas, there is a tendency to go for a best-of-breed approach for UC. Rather than looking at one vendor as the panacea to their business challenges, they will attempt to deploy solutions from multiple vendors and trade off between managing them in-house or via a third party. On the opposite side, since SMEs typically have much less in-house IT resources and expertise, they tend to choose a single vendor that can deliver all UC solution. With comparatively limited time and money, they will need simpler solutions in order to focus on their business activities.

SMEs have unique challenges that require specialized solutions, usually ignored by most traditional vendors. Generally, SMEs have limited resources, both in terms of personnel and financial resources, leading companies to do more with less. Budgets are tighter and have to be spent more carefully. In addition, there may not be a dedicated IT manager, being employees often responsible for the management of several tasks, for example. Just like larger companies, SMEs often rely on remote offices and workers who need to communicate with the main office and each other. As technologies evolve, IT staffs and budgets may not be able to keep up with the demands, and solutions developed specifically for SME companies will be required. This means focusing on not just the price of a solution, but on the total cost of ownership, taking into account the cost to implement, maintain and support a solution (Schreiner, 2007). A good approach for a SME is to consider the adoption of an open source UC solution. In the open source market, the SIPxchange project strictly adheres to the Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) standard in an attempt to build a fully distributed, open, and interoperable SIP infrastructure for the enterprise (Rybaczky, 2004). In fact, open source has grown into a credible alternative to proprietary and often expensive systems. Building a UC core with SIP represents a good implementation alternative for a SME company.

Definitely, one of the biggest challenges that an SME faces when introducing a new UC solution is overcoming the resistance from employees and customers to the cultural change that the new solution will entail. Some design considerations that are uniquely relevant to the deployment of a UC solution include the volume and diversity of messages received by SME employees and the need of integration with other voice

mail messaging systems (Steinmann, 2007). If the nature of the business is to communicate mostly via e-mail (with only occasional voice communications), the benefits of deployment a UC might be marginal. SMEs with larger volumes of messages from multiple sources are better candidates for a UC. Given the modular nature of a UC solution, it might be a wise strategic decision to deploy core features of a UC (likely at a lower cost than deploying a full-blown system all at once) and continue to add additional features when the need increases. In this way, SME's future upgrade options remain open and flexible.

Generally SMEs can't compete on price compared with their larger counterparts, and instead focus on customer service and/or product differentiation (Straton, 2008). Speed to market can make or break a company, as companies can get a foothold in a market before their larger competitors come in and offer similar products/services for less money. SMEs need to differentiate themselves by offering personalized and enhanced customer service. Quality communications with customers, suppliers, and employees is the key to providing the differentiated services.

In Table 2 we can see a concise overview of a unified communications approach for large enterprises and SMEs.

Table 2. Unified communications overview: Large Enterprises vs. SMEs (Arnold, 2008)

| | Large Enterprises | SMEs |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| Level of awareness | High | Low |
| Buying decision | Strategic | Tactical |
| Deployment type | Split: Internally and managed IP PBX | Hosted/Managed |
| Single vendor or best-of-breed | Best-of-breed | Single vendor |
| Mobile integration | Split | Split |

3. CONCLUSION

Unified communications offer a tremendous opportunity to improve enterprise efficiency, speed communications and decision making, streamline tasks, improve workflow, shorten project lifecycles, and improve customer interaction. A successful implementation requires that enterprises understand these benefits, determine specific business cases that are applicable to their own organizations and develop a migration strategy that takes both architecture and organizational factors into account.

Large companies typically have a high level of awareness, they follow a best-of-breed approach for unified communications and they tend to see unified communications as a strategic move. On the other side, SMEs are much more divided in their UC approach and they tend to see it as a tactical move. They look for less complex solutions that are easy to manage from a single one vendor.

Large enterprises and SMEs should continue to pressure their existing suppliers for tighter mobile integration with UC services. Both groups appear to place a high value controlling costs through better telecom services and mobile device management solutions in the longer-term. SMEs should continue to focus on UC point products that add immediate benefit or value to their businesses. It will be easier to shop for and prove the business case for UC products that solve a specific business need, which will reduce the latency in internal decision making processes and will improve the reachability of mobile staff.

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