



Unified Communication

White Paper

Abstract

This paper looks at the capabilities that can be found in unified communications solutions today and how these can be used within a business to improve business practices and improve individual productivity.

An industry definition of unified communications

Unified communications is an extension of unified messaging to include all communications aspects, both voice and data based, and to provide access to all messaging through audio, video and data based devices. The enterprise communication network has extended beyond a voice and data mailbox to converged applications over IP Telephony, home working, video messaging, hot-desking, internet hotspots (WLANs) and mobile computing.

Unified communications includes unified messaging which enables users to access all message types - voice, video, fax, and email - from virtually any communications device -telephone, PC, or the internet - through a centralised mailbox on the PC. Unified messaging is a good concept but uptake has been limited by the inability to provide a tangible business return on investment (ROI). Unified messaging allows users to manage all of their messages from their familiar email inbox using common email systems such as Microsoft Outlook, Novell GroupWise and Lotus Notes. The integration within these already familiar email systems practically eliminates the need to train employees because they are able to manage all messages just like an email. However, the benefits in terms of individual productivity are intangible. Extending the unified messaging capability to include voice telephony devices delivers an immediate and tangible ROI and business benefits.

Unified communications takes unified messaging one step further, integrating the messaging system with an intelligent telephony system and unifying all telephone based communications under a single number linked to the unified message inbox. Unified communications means that when out of the office or on the road, users can also access and manage all of their messages, whether fax, email, video or voice, from any telephone, whether mobile or fixed line, from anywhere in the world. Emails can be collected and replied to by voice, increasing individual productivity and contactability. Unified communications provides unparalleled flexibility by giving users the ability to access their communications 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year from any location. Intelligent telephony enables an effective and efficient location independent working environment to be established, supporting a variety of working practices such as hot-desking, home-based working, mobile working and multiple location working, each of which can demonstrate tangible ROI in terms of facility savings, performance enhancement, reduction in staff required to support off-site workers and increased productivity from individuals in terms of responsiveness and ability to handle business communications while on the move.

The challenge of today's business

In today's business environment, professionals are constantly bombarded with time and mission-critical information, most of which comes in the form of email, voice and fax messages. An employee's ability to handle and respond to these messages can mean the difference between a company that effectively communicates with its key audience, and one that is out of touch with those most critical to its success.

The average employee now spends a substantial amount of the working day managing this information, rather than using it to advantage. As telecommuters, travelling and off-site employees become more common. Companies are also struggling with the need to keep these 'road warriors' or mobile professionals informed and in touch.

Surveys report that workers spend an average of 30 minutes each day in voicemail and it is a fact that over 80% of business calls made are first intercepted by voicemail.

“Hello, you’ve reached the voice mailbox of …..”

These simple words can create anxiety and tension. When we hear the dreaded words, “I’m not in my office right now, but leave a message and I’ll return your call…,” we feel defeated, yet voicemail is a fact of life for most of us.

We know our customers, suppliers and business contacts are busy people. They are constantly in meetings and difficult to reach. We know that they will have a large number of calls to return, and hope they will return ours. We also know that many people use voicemail to screen their calls. They sort through the messages, focusing on the most important as a way to organise their busy schedule.

The proliferation of telephone numbers, voice mailboxes, pagers, fax machines, and other devices where a person can be reached has had the exact opposite impact than was originally intended. People are harder to reach and they spend more time tracking down and responding to their messages. If people have several telephone numbers, the chances are that their contactability is suffering as a result.

Today, both the mobility and the pace of business have increased to the point that mobile phones have become the primary way of reaching someone. Despite this, important calls and messages still come in to office voicemail, home office phones, faxes or (even worse) a mobile phone with a dead battery or in an area without coverage.

Office phone systems, mobile phones, personal digital assistants, multiple voice mailboxes, fax machines and pagers are all powerful tools that enable mobile workers to communicate with colleagues, customers and business associates. However, more tools do not necessarily translate to increased efficiency and productivity. Anyone who has ever played 'phone tag' will appreciate the value of an intelligent number where users or teams have a single number which is their virtual or 'universal' telephone number. The universal truth behind personal numbering is that calls are to people, not to telephone extensions.

Clearly, voicemail systems are here to stay but businesses which use their voicemail as a last resort for their customers rather than the only option will reap the dividends of increased customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and increased staff productivity. It is also certain that voicemail will remain an integral and vital component of unified messaging and unified communications systems.

The benefits/Rol of unified communications

The increased productivity, time savings and flexibility of unified communications translate into valuable cost savings. A recent industry study measured the effects of unified communications on time savings and productivity. The study found that, by utilising unified communications, mobile users experienced a time saving gain of 70 percent when compared to the traditional means of checking messages.

The first facet of the study compared users who were able to review and manage all of their voice, fax, and email messages over the telephone using unified communications with those who

check messages on the road the conventional way: by calling in over the telephone to listen to voice messages; calling an assistant at the main office to send faxes to the nearest fax machine; and connecting to the internet with a laptop computer to download and check emails. One important point to note is that, with unified communications, mobile employees always have access to all of their messages at anytime. However, with the traditional means of retrieving messages on the road, users must often rely on in-office personnel for some messaging tasks such as forwarding a fax.

Office workers also gain significant and measurable time savings by having all voice, fax, and email messages displayed in a single interface. According to the study, users experienced a 53 percent time saving using unified communications to check all of their messages from within their familiar Lotus Notes and Microsoft Outlook interface, as opposed to the traditional means of checking voice messages over the telephone, fax messages at the fax machine, and emails at the desktop PC.

In addition to increased productivity, time and cost savings, unified communications can also make the life of an IT administrator much easier. Having an open standards-based platform with a single flexible and intuitive user interface is the key to effective system administration.

Where to implement unified communications

A comprehensive unified communications solution enables workers to maintain on-the-fly contact with colleagues and customers using enhanced telephony services that tie together landline and mobile phones, pagers, faxing, unified messaging and internet messaging capabilities. Unified communications has value to a wide range of working professionals:

- the 'road warrior'
- the 'desk warrior'
- the 'virtual team'

Unified communications is designed to address four big communications challenges:

- managing multiple communications tools and devices
- putting an end to voicemail frustrations
- improving call connect ratios, particularly outside of the traditional office
- integrating mobile communications with the fixed line enterprise telecommunications infrastructure

The 'road warrior'

By allowing access to all message types from a familiar and convenient interface, remote and travelling employees are more likely to stay in touch when they're on the road. The ability to direct calls across the PSTN or Private Telephone Network provides the essential telephony support for location independent working, home working, 'hot desking' and workspace-sharing environments.

Messages without a keyboard

Unified communications systems should allow users to access email messages via the telephone, using text-to-speech technology. When using a telephone to retrieve messages, users can listen to an email message using text-to-speech, choose the reply option, and record a voice response. That voice message can be attached as a standard .wav file to a reply email message and sent to the original message sender. This allows the mobile worker to access and respond to email messages from any telephone, eliminating the need to have access to a computer in order to retrieve and respond to email messages.

Information on the mobile phone

Another valuable unified communications feature for the mobile worker is Short Message Service (SMS). SMS means that the user can be notified on their mobile phone that they have a message waiting for them in their inbox. If it is an email message, a small amount of text, the sender and the time the message arrived can all be included on the display. If it is a voice message, the user can view the caller ID and time the message was received. SMS notifies the user of a fax message by including the number of pages and the time the fax was received. Users can also specify that they only want SMS to notify them of a message if it is urgent or from a particular person such as their manager or team member.

The 'desk warrior'

Desk bound employees need an easy-to-use tool that will allow them to manage the ever-growing number of messages they receive. In today's business environment, it is imperative that users be able to access and respond to their messages quickly. Unified communications allows employees to access their voice, fax, and email messages anytime, from virtually any communications device: telephone, mobile phone, web client or PC. With employees receiving more than 100 messages per day, unified communications enables employees to be more responsive and it enables them to be more productive, saving company time and money.

Confidentiality, convenience and personalisation

As an extension of the current email system, unified communications brings voice, video, fax, and email messages into the familiar email inbox. This means that all communications including faxes can be viewed confidentially, annotated and forwarded to other subscribers, or responded to by mail, phone or fax - all from the convenience of the user's desktop PC.

The virtual team

Providing quality customer service is imperative in today's competitive business environment. Unified communications should assist in securing profitable, long-term relationships with customers. Increasingly today, organisations are based on flexible, virtual teams of 'experts'. A team telephone number can provide business benefits in terms of ensuring that key contacts are responded to in a timely manner and is particularly important when the team is a group of professionals serving a customer base on a flexible time and location basis. For instance, a team of nurses or solicitors could use it to ensure prompt response to their customers.

Summary

Unified communications is suitable for all sizes of businesses – from large enterprises to virtual/home offices. It is invaluable for anyone who spends time on the road, who works outside a traditional office, or who needs to be accessible to important associates but needs better call control.

Unified communications is a superior form of unified messaging, consolidating multiple business communications tools into a single mailbox and providing a single personal access number. All the different phone numbers – office phone, mobile phone, car phone, home office phone, pager, fax – are integrated into one single 'universal' number and messages are stored in a single mailbox. Unified messaging on its own tackles the problem of checking multiple voice mailboxes but does not address the larger issue of improving call connect ratios. With unified communications, personal numbering provides a single contact point, improves contactability and provides users with a single number for callers to reach them, regardless of where they are, and a single mailbox where all messages are sent and stored. It adds real-time call connection, routing and even multi-party conference calling for each user. Solutions can be integrated into corporate voicemail systems, making them ideal for enterprises that stipulate the use of corporate voicemail.

TeleWare intelligent Communication Solutions

TeleWare's intelligent Office products - intelligent Number, intelligent Assistant, intelligent Message Centre and intelligent Conference products provide all of the features described in this paper. Details of these products are available at www.teleware.com

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