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## Unified Communications and Collaboration (UC&C) in Professional Services

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# The Impact of UC&C on the Professional Services Market

At the most fundamental level, organizations in the professional services market offer services primarily to other corporate entities or public bodies. Examples include accounting firms, law offices, architecture firms, engineering firms, and providers of a wide range of consulting services.

In one sense the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the professional services market in the same way as other sectors. Like all organizations, when COVID-19 arrived, professional services firms had to scramble overnight to stay connected with clients and keep employees connected as well.

But in another sense, the impact of COVID-19 has been especially acute for professional services firms. Given the high degree of personal interaction involved in delivering professional services, outsized reliance on UC&C technology precipitated by the pandemic has not only made it more difficult for firms to carry out daily operations but also to ensure client satisfaction.

However, there has been a silver lining. Remote communication enabled by UC&C technology has not been entirely disruptive to professional services firms. In fact, to some degree, the opposite has been true and professional services workers have thrived in a way they did not previously.

Trial lawyers are a perfect example. Rather than needing to travel between courthouses, attorneys can move from case to case with a simple click within their collaboration platform. At the end of the day, they have been more productive and less fatigued than in their traditional mode of work. It's a verdict rendered in favour of counsel, their clients, and their firms.

Engineers are another great case study. Over the course of a project, engineers have regular interaction with other parties such as clients, architects, construction companies, environmental groups, and government agencies. The success of any engineering effort requires careful coordination between these groups. Contemporary collaboration tools enable physically dispersed individuals to communicate in real-time within a consolidated channel and to produce work materials based on a single version of the original. Projects get completed on-time and within budget.



# Key UC&C Themes



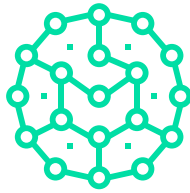
## Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

As COVID-19 took hold, it became evident that UC&C services were essential to preserving business continuity and supporting a remote workforce indefinitely. For many enterprises, COVID-19 also simplified the decision to pivot abruptly to cloud-based solutions. Such solutions enabled companies to adopt new capabilities on a global scale quickly, while still providing a necessary level of security. As a result, demand for UC&C services and cloud-based solutions mushroomed.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve, visions of a hybrid workforce are emerging. Many employers are planning or beginning to return to the office while also supporting employees who wish to work remotely. When the dust finally settles, the current work from home (WFH) population will have shrunk but remain above pre-pandemic numbers.

Research from GlobalData provides some additional color regarding the above observations. According to a GlobalData survey, in 2019 (pre-pandemic) 54% of respondents indicated that ensuring employees have access to the right technologies to do their work remotely was either a high or medium priority; in 2021 that percentage leapt to 77%. In that same survey, 62% of respondents stated that securing employees' home networks was either a high or medium priority, and 55% listed investment in new collaboration tools as either a high or medium priority.

In a separate GlobalData survey of IT decision-makers at professional services firms, 27% of respondents indicated they would choose to return to work premises full time when lockdowns eased, nearly the same number (28%) indicated they would work remotely full time, and the remaining 45% would choose a hybrid approach; nearly one-third of professional services organizations expect most employees will work from home full-time in the next six to 24 months while only 9% expect the majority of employees to be in the office full-time and the majority (60%) expect some type of hybrid environment.



## Multi-Platform Landscape

The UC&C landscape consists of a wide range of platform providers. Microsoft and Cisco remain the two largest players with their respective Teams and Webex platforms. Zoom has emerged as a major force in the videoconferencing space and providers such as RingCentral, Slack (Salesforce owned), and 8x8, among others, have emerged as key challengers.

The challenge for professional services organizations is understanding which solution is the best fit – and the answer is often a combination of more than one. The main platform providers in the UC&C space are converging on a common core of platform features. Components such as meetings, team collaboration, instant messaging (IM), calling (voice and video), and file sharing are all now table stakes. However, some are further along the curve than others with features such as artificial intelligence (AI) and creating an immersive collaboration experience are adding to the level differentiation between the platform vendors.

Working with a service provider, such as AT&T, who operate on a vendor-neutral basis and has partnerships with all major UC&C vendors, offers the benefit of an independent partner who can help professional services organizations to find the right choice.

When GlobalData has spoken to businesses about achieving the highest levels of compatibility and employee buy-in for UC&C solutions, especially those with AI components, businesses have told GlobalData that finding a solution partner with strong professional services capabilities is critical. Pre- and -post sales skills such as auditing, solution design, and user training are all vital to success.



## Interoperability and Integration

As noted above, many organizations opt for a multi-vendor solution – e.g., using Microsoft Teams or RingCentral for team collaboration, but using Cisco Webex or Zoom for videoconferencing. These platforms need to be able to interact with each other, but a truly digital collaboration solution will also deliver integration with other key corporate applications and hardware (e.g., integrating collaboration solutions with Salesforce, Oracle, or SAP). Similarly, integrating collaboration solutions with contact center platforms can extend the ability of employees to be client facing.

On the hardware side as offices are increasingly reconfigured around meeting rooms and collaborative workspaces, the need to integrate legacy video equipment with new conferencing applications becomes more important. For example, ensuring that Microsoft Teams or Google Meet video calls can be joined from Cisco Webex Rooms devices.





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## Voice in the UC&C Space

Voice may be considered “legacy” technology, but for many it remains the preferred means of remote communication and collaboration. Thus, as companies everywhere embark on digital transformation journeys, voice needs to be fully integrated with new platforms. GlobalData’s research highlights that voice remains a critical point of interaction with customers both on the client service side and for sales. Indeed, when customers have high importance and/or complex issues that they need to address, voice is their preferred method of communication. Voice services that deliver clear, uncluttered, and uninterrupted sound can help professional services organizations deliver excellent customer service when it matters most.

Cloud-based telephony platforms must also be business-grade to support widely dispersed workforces. With some employees based in an office environment and others toiling away in their private residences, clear voice communication is essential in delivering a truly collaborative working environment.

The cloud combined with VoIP has elevated voice to a digital means that can handle conversations plus much more. Digitized voice enables a host of applications such as speech recognition, speech-to-text (and vice-versa), transcription/translation, voice search, conversational AI, sentiment analysis, and chatbots. These applications are rapidly gaining traction because they represent a wealth of new forms of business value. Thus, the value proposition for voice is expanding, especially when considering it now also plays a ubiquitous role on UC&C platforms as a companion to video and messaging.

Businesses should also be aware that voice is changing when it comes to platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Cisco Webex. The platforms can deliver voice in video sessions, but to replicate a true telephony experience outside simple video calls, a separate voice solution is

required. Service providers can offer their own IP voice propositions as well as services based on direct routing solutions such as Direct Routing for Microsoft Teams, Microsoft Operator Connect, or Webex Calling. Understanding which of these is right for your business is best achieved by talking to a provider with a strong professional services capability.



## Voice Recording

In addition to the importance of voice as a means of remote communication and collaboration, legal, regulatory, and audit requirements make the ability to capture, archive, and analyze conversations crucial for businesses in the professional services sector. Companies should be aware that best-practice solutions offer the ability to record conversations automatically, and stop recording when legally necessary.

Central to gaining insight is the use of AI to evaluate the content of discussions and the sentiment of participants. At its simplest form, AI can automatically generate transcripts and action points from meetings, freeing employees to perform more high-value tasks. Content analysis can also help professional services firms ensure they meet compliance and regulatory requirements – e.g., by highlighting sensitive data or scenarios where there may be potential for a breach of protocol.

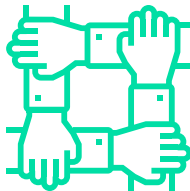
Sentiment analysis can be leveraged to gauge customer satisfaction as well as to anticipate customer service issues before they arise. Regardless of what type of analysis is performed, paramount is the ability to capture conversations crossing multiple voice services and endpoints and integrating them into a central, cloud-based repository.

# 02 Key Takeaways



## Professional Services Support

Businesses need to partner with service providers that can educate them about how technology such as collaboration tools, AI, and contact center solutions can satisfy employee work habits. Those habits will center around a more fluid workforce that will require tools that function regardless of work location. It is important to bear in mind that work locations can vary widely. They can be concentrated in the vicinity of a specific city or town, or as far flung as traversing multiple countries.



## Cooperation is Paramount

The UC&C environment of a typical organization consists of an array of platforms from multiple players. Customers prefer to pick and choose specific platforms to perform specific tasks; they often resent being locked into a single supplier. At the same time, customers expect the platforms to interact seamlessly. Thus, interoperability between competitor platforms (whether hardware or software) is quickly becoming de rigueur and service providers, vendors, and OTT players alike are striking agreements to partner.



## The Pandemic and Technology

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a double-edged sword for professional services firms. COVID-19 has forced firms to abandon personal interaction and substitute it with technology. Given how heavily they rely upon the personal touch to build their reputation and ensure client satisfaction, firms have been saddled with a substantial burden.

However, to some degree the opposite has been true, and firms have benefited in unanticipated ways. What they've lost on the personal side, they've gained in productivity and efficiency.



## User Training

Deploying new collaboration tools is only half the battle. Collaboration solutions will fail if they are not used, or if they are not used correctly. Merely presenting the solution to employees is insufficient. User training when a new platform is delivered and at regular intervals (e.g., once a year) will help ensure that the investment is not wasted and that employees are working in an efficient and compliant manner. User training can also help to project a professional image when using collaboration tools to communicate with customers, partners, and other external bodies.





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