Brief

Five Best Practices for Unified Communications

Background

To meet today's increasing demands, businesses need to communicate and collaborate more efficiently. Communication needs to be timely and effective, reaching people where and when they want to be reached, at the office, at home or on the go. Collaboration needs to include a broad range of individuals, cross geographic and organizational boundaries and be integrated with business processes.

One way to address these needs is with Unified Communications and Collaboration (UC&C), which brings together the tools of voice, email, messaging and conferencing and integrates them with business applications such as enterprise resource planning (ERP) and customer relationship management (CRM). A unified communications and Collaboration solution can help improve organizational efficiencies, while simultaneously empowering knowledge workers. The efficiency gains come in part from the integration and optimization of communication silos, supported by enterprise-wide standards and shared services. Productivity gains are harder to measure, but there's an intuitive benefit that could be realized by reducing human latency. It might be hard to quantify, but many of us have experienced the frustration of "telephone tag." With presence on a UC platform, employees can see who's available at a glance, before placing the call.

Unified Communications

- Presence
- Mobility
- IP Calling
- Voicemail
- Email
- Unified messaging
- Instant messaging
- Voice, web and video conferencing
- Calendar

Unified Communications integrates multiple communication and collaboration tools with presence behind a single user interface and contextually embeds communications within key business processes/applications.

Characteristics of Successful UC Projects

Enterprises that have begun migrating toward UC have been experiencing some challenges. For UC to be effective, the entire network should be prepared to manage the applications. The more complex the network, the more challenging it can be to deploy UC effectively. Limited platform choices and inflexible pricing models are making choices more challenging for network managers. Return on Investment (ROI) for UC needs to consider benefits that may be difficult to provide in dollars and cents, as much of the value comes from improved communications among employees and customers. Our experience with early adopters indicate that successful UC programs share the following characteristics:

- They are often inspired by IT, but should be driven by clear business needs – it's not just a matter of rolling out the infrastructure

- They are well supported by existing architectures, and their complexity is acknowledged – programs succeed when they're supported by detailed plans to manage both technical and organizational change

- They focus on the smallest practical set of technology choices to minimize interoperability issues

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Five Best Practices

Enterprises that are realizing value from their UC programs are succeeding because they've followed some basic, common-sense practices. If your organization is considering a move in this direction, here are five best practices to consider:

1. Define a Guiding Vision that Supports Desired Business Outcomes

UC depends on network readiness, network and application convergence and integrated wired and wireless access. It also involves a blending of software and platform capabilities, leaving most enterprises with a multi-vendor solution. Managing the integration of disparate communications tools and dealing with the associated re-training programs also makes for a complex transition. Developing the right strategy requires a long-term view, as well as an understanding of the short-term challenges.

2. Include Sufficient Up-Front Planning

A clear roadmap for a UC implementation can help businesses manage expectations and be sure that time frames are realized. The roadmap should recognize that UC is not just a technical solution and include initiatives aimed at ensuring end-user acceptance. The plan should also consider whether some commodity services are better suited to an outsourced or Cloud delivery model so corporate knowledge resources can focus on strategic UC applications.

3. Clearly Align Business and Technical Requirements

Phased migration plans can maximize the value of existing investments in applications, messaging, voice and other supporting infrastructures. Vendor-agnostic product recommendations can help ensure that the design meets an organization's specific requirements. To increase flexibility, AT&T supports specific client solutions for Cisco Jabber® or Microsoft® Lync® environments. UC migration planning should also consider next generation service architectures, such as SIP Session Management and hybrid solutions that include both premises-based and Cloud services.

4. Find the Right Champion for the UC Program

Some programs emerge from IT and seek to introduce new capabilities. Programs may also emerge from business units seeking to establish UC capabilities to support a new product, service or business initiative. Regardless of the champion, there must be a well-developed integration plan and a realistic level of funding.

5. Establish Cross-Functional Teams to Help Manage the Implementation

These teams can help deal with the complexity of a "meta-technology" environment that includes many different parts, and can develop a single methodology for planning implementation and introduction. Cross-functional teams can also be invaluable when it comes to communicating the benefits across the organization, as well as to customers, partners and suppliers.

Seeing Benefits

Once a UC program is under way, reaping the benefits ultimately depends on the new capabilities being adopted by users. An enterprise can make all the right decisions and deliver on a well-thought-out strategy and still not benefit from UC. Employees must be willing to make changes in the way they conduct business and communicate. UC can help increase the efficiency of virtual teams, while reducing travel time and expenses, and can also eliminate some communication barriers, reduce cycle times and improve the quality of day-to-day communication. AT&T UC Federation Service, for example, helps reduce barriers by providing an open, standards-based platform for interconnecting communication services from multiple companies. Users can connect with teams inside and outside the company, as if they are using the same communication platform.

UC can support the re-engineering of business processes and accelerate process improvement, but only if process owners are willing to evolve. If not addressed, user resistance to change can be a deal-breaker for an otherwise well-planned UC program.

Despite the great promise of UC, it remains a challenging prospect for many organizations. Different vendors offer different approaches and interoperability between platforms is still evolving. Independent advice can help companies select the strategies, architectures and deployment plans that make sense for them.

AT&T Consulting offers independent and holistic UC services that include strategy, architecture, integration and deployment of UC technologies. We can help enterprises realize the promise of UC using a cost-effective, phased process that includes the evaluation and integration of premises-based and hosted solution alternatives.

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