LEVERAGING UNIFIED COMMUNICATIONS FOR ACCELERATED BUSINESS PERFORMANCE
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Abstract

Business communication today relies on a host of services and devices that range from basic fixed-line phones and emails to VoIP telephony and instant messaging. At the same time, it can be challenging and costly to maintain multiple disparate systems. Some of them may not even be used to their full capacity. In this scenario, the concept of Unified Communications comes as a key business advantage. It is a cloud-based service that integrates multiple channels and devices to establish an efficient and cost-effective business communication setup. By leveraging Unified Communications, enterprises can streamline their collaboration internally as also with their customers and stakeholders.

Introduction

Present-day enterprises no longer use outdated PSTN phone lines to establish connectivity between their workers and with their clients. The infrastructure for communication has evolved over the years, and today there are multiple ways to connect people regardless of the geographic distance between them. These include desk phones, mobiles, VoIP systems, emails, SMS texts and instant messaging platforms. However, even for businesses, most of these systems operate largely independent of each other with little or no integration between applications, equipment and devices.

Modernised enterprises also have a significant percentage of their employees working from remote locations, and they need to keep the workforce across different offices connected. To optimise productivity and responsiveness towards customers, they must ensure that employees have access to the right device, at the right time and in the right place. The technologies for connectivity and collaboration must work together harmoniously, a solution that has been termed as Unified Communications (UC).

This paper highlights the benefits of UC for businesses, the strategy that they should create to deploy it, the actual implementation of UC systems and the relationship between Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) and UC. It also briefly talks about the future possibilities with UC systems.

Understanding Unified Communications and its Benefits for Businesses
Unified Communication is a set of solutions to offer a consistent user interface and user experience across a variety of devices and media types. It symbolises the integration of business communication services such as voice calls (including VoIP), instant messaging, presence information, mobility features, video and web conferencing, data sharing and speech recognition with non-real-time communication setups like voicemail, e-mails, SMS and fax.

UC enables businesses to stay in touch with people – who are essential for its operations and growth – at any time, anywhere using an appropriate device. These people include employees, customers, suppliers/vendors, consultants and other stakeholders. Another crucial element of UC is that it gives businesses control over who contacts them and when.

With a UC system in place, an organisation can break through the barriers of communication to increase the productivity of its employees, reduce business costs and delight its customers.

By giving single number access and outbound identity, UC makes it simple for customers to contact a business. For the organisation, call handling becomes simpler because they can route calls to different associates at the contact centre, a mobile phone, a voice message box or a geographically distant destination. Incoming calls can also be routed to an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system to help the callers and guide them for quick resolution of their queries.

The top benefits of a UC system include:

**Continuous productivity from any location**

Employees today do not spend all the time at their desks. Their diverse roles may require them to visit clients’ offices, travel to their own organisation’s other offices, or negotiate purchase agreements with suppliers across the country.
At times, bad weather or personal issues may require them to work from home.

UC enables such employees to operate from any location while having full access to the communication tools that they use in the office. They can make and receive calls using just their laptop and their mobile phone. They can also participate in conferences with colleagues or customers and can transfer calls to other teams.

Improved responsiveness

The ability to react quickly to customer queries/complaints is an important differentiator, particularly for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). It helps them to compete with larger companies in the market.

Potential customers have several choices when they have to decide with whom to conduct business.

If they contact an organisation and do not get a response, they may go somewhere else. Delayed responses towards clients, vendors and between employees can cause deadlines and orders to be missed, and such incidents may lead to business loss.

With UC, businesses can maintain their competitive advantage and optimise responsiveness by ensuring that anyone who is trying to get in touch always reaches the right point of contact. It reduces delays in business communications.

Recruiting and retaining a skilled workforce

Skilled employees are the best resources and vital assets for a business.
However, SMEs have fewer resources to hire talent from a wide pool, to arrange for relocation of workers and to obtain visas for them. This constraint potentially impedes their diversity and growth.

A strategic UC program that offers telecommuting facilities to workers can help to recruit and retain employees without requiring them to visit the office. People can be hired from any part of the country or world and can leverage UC to work in a particular time zone even if they are based in a different one. The talent pool is, therefore, expanded, bringing significant dividends for the organisation.

**Reduced operating expenses**

To thrive in a challenging global economy, enterprises of all sizes need to check their expenses closely.

This includes deploying the right phone systems that can help them bring down their costs. By implementing a centrally managed UC solution, they can significantly reduce the telecommunication costs that go into setups for Internet connectivity, web conferencing apps, local and long-distance phone calls, maintenance costs and employee phone expense reports.

**Gaining a competitive edge and accommodating business growth**

Efficient execution of operations and quick response towards their customers are critical for the success of any business. An organisation that seeks a significant advantage over its competitors or is trying to gain a greater market share must have efficient internal and external communication systems. Teleworking and UC can help them to achieve such advantage by enabling their workers to communicate more effectively from almost any location.

Customers who can easily and promptly reach service representatives at an organisation through any medium – voice or text – are happier to stay with the same or choose it over others.
Internally, when employees can collaborate instantly, they can make more timely decisions, which facilitate efficient operations and eventually contribute to business growth. UC systems play a critical role in strengthening such links.

Creating a Strategy for Unified Communications

Launching a system for UC into business is not a complicated task when the organisation has a well-planned strategy.

There are four crucial tasks involved in defining a UC strategy:

1. Evaluation of business needs is the first step in developing a UC strategy. It is important to document the goals of communication technology by:
   - Checking how employees at the workplace communicate, who they generally communicate with and what their work locations are
   - Determining the particular UC capabilities required for the business in terms of collaboration, mobility and customer interaction needs
   - Stating and prioritising the timelines for delivering the planned capabilities

2. Understanding business needs and specifying what it should achieve

The UC strategy should also identify the different workgroups in the organisation — desktop users, laptop users, highly mobile workforce, customer service associates, front desk employees, team supervisors and managers. They may all have their unique requirements.
How does the business plan to support them? What capabilities – email, instant messaging, voicemail, VoIP phones, conference calling – should they have access to for performing their tasks most efficiently? These are the kind of questions that need to be answered while outlining the strategy.

Taking stock of the existing communication environment

The organisation planning to deploy UC must then look at its own technology and communication environment, including the infrastructure, security and IT support systems. Integration of the existing communication tools and the new ones to be deployed into a centralised structure is the very idea of UC. For the businesses that have limited IT resources or tech support, the deployment of UC solutions needs more responsive support from the service provider. They should look for connectivity and collaboration tools that come with Service Level Agreements (SLAs).

Trained support personnel should be readily available whenever the organisation needs them.

Access to the UC system’s capabilities must be strategically planned, and security policies must be documented before the actual implementation to bring in apt safeguards and regulatory compliance.

Some of the questions that should be considered include:

- Which functionalities should be secured by a firewall?
- What kind of data can be exchanged through emails and messages?
- What information should be encrypted?
- Where can data be stored and accessed from – on-premise systems/cloud?
- What will be the effect on workflows?

Budgeting and creating a timeline for the rollout of the UC solution
A UC solution may bring specific advanced communication capabilities to the business that it did not have earlier. The organisation, therefore, needs to develop procedures and policies to roll out the new technologies and may have to train its employees on the compliant usage of the new tools.

Costs related to server and software

Internet connectivity costs – modems, circuits and firewalls

Telephone devices – handsets, headsets, voicemail, fax machines, mobile devices and PBX switches

Local and long distance call charges, mobile plan conferencing, call re-routing and other calling features

In the development of a UC strategy, the cost is also a critical factor. To keep the figure under control, a pace should be defined for implementing the solution. It can be deployed in phases as per the budget and priorities of the business or in the form of a comprehensive package keeping in mind the near-future needs.

As a solution integrated with multiple communication technologies, UC may enable a business to replace some of the techniques it already uses and trim down or eliminate some expenses. These can include:

The key to the success of UC for a business is the blend of policies and technologies that help its people to choose the communication tool that best suits their situation and simultaneously maximises their productivity. At times, they may need to work from home or receive a call from a client even before they reach the office.
This is precisely why UC projects must begin with a solid plan.

To successfully deploy its UC solution, the business opting for it must have an experienced service provider who can coordinate with it through all the aspects of deployment. It is also good to have a dedicated internal project manager who can:

- Check and maintain the project plan and schedule
- Manage and coordinate the activities associated with the task
- Document and convey the status of activities to business heads/finance team
- Ensure a systematic change management

### Session Internet Protocol and Unified Communications

Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) is a signalling protocol that helps to initiate, alter and terminate real-time sessions involving voice, video, texting and other apps and communication services between two or more endpoints on IP networks.

Businesses are increasingly using VoIP telephony for voice-based communication over the Internet. By combining data and voice on the same IP infrastructure, SIP Trunk can create an effective foundation for Unified Communications.

A single SIP Trunk can replace the multiple fixed phone lines used by a business. It works over an IP-based network, and unlike PSTN trunk that allows for a limited number of calls through the available channel, SIP can enable more than 1000 voice sessions simultaneously over just one trunk. The limit for the number of calls depends on the offered bandwidth and not on the number of channels. Scalability is, therefore, an advantage. When the number of employees making and receiving calls increases, the business only has to request the service provider for additional bandwidth. There is no need to ask for extra channels or trunks as in conventional PSTN telephony. The call capacity can also be managed across multiple locations and to minimise idle capacity.

Organisations that need to deploy a UC solution and have IP PBX infrastructure to support SIP can use SIP Trunk.
It helps them to simplify and integrate their network architecture by enabling the transit of data, voice and video packets on the IP network and circumvents the requirement for multiple conventional trunks.

**Maintaining the Unified Communications Solution**

Having deployed its UC solution, a business also needs to ensure that it has appropriate technical resources and processes to support the users and maintain the system well. This challenge becomes easier with a trusted and experienced service provider who can provide SLAs for each service delivered. The SLAs should outline the procedures for performing lifecycle functions including upgrades, performance optimisation, regular maintenance of hardware and configuration management.

**Future Possibilities with Unified Communications**

UC systems will progressively evolve to improve business communications, and competent organisations that understand their benefits will integrate them into their workflows.

With the advent of the Internet of Things (IoT), Artificial Intelligence (AI) and advanced analytics, the use of UC systems will be empowered further. Working in tandem, IoT and UC can offer enterprises with a significant pool of business intelligence and improve their collaboration capabilities. Together, these digital technologies will not only transform legacy IT practices but also enable the simplification of data collection processes. This, in turn, will lead to better and faster decision-making.

According to some UC experts, we may also see voice assistants becoming more intelligent as they get fuelled by natural language processing abilities and continual machine learning. Instant transcription along with more contextual data through AI is also a possibility.
At Tata Tele Business Services (TTBS), we have a host of connectivity and collaboration solutions to make business communication seamless and more efficient. We also help businesses deploy cloud and SaaS platforms for secure and anytime, anywhere access to their data.

Our approach to UC is based on SIP Trunk, which also facilitates interoperability with other IP-based systems and IT equipment. Moreover, it helps organisations to scale their UC system conveniently.

All our solutions are backed by industry-leading SLAs, assuring our customers of 99.5% network uptime and a future-ready voice network that keeps up with their evolving business needs.

To know more about Unified Communications for your business, call us at 1800-266-1800.
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