



OPINION PIECE

Tellumat Telecoms

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The state of the unified communications market

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To understand the true benefits of unified communications (UC), it is necessary to examine the current state of this market, where it came from and where it is headed. Along the way, we can debunk a few myths and misconceptions that stand in the way of its widespread adoption.

UC is not VOIP

- It's bigger - UC and voice over IP (VOIP) are sometimes used interchangeably, but VOIP is only a component of UC. The trouble with this comparison is that VOIP is mostly associated with Least Cost Routing (LCR) and its cost-saving, whereas UC prides itself on enhancing productivity.
- It's better - IP communications has come a long way since the Internet revolution. Leading vendors today offer carrier-grade IP voice featuring industrial-strength collaboration and business process integration.

Understanding UC's benefits

Gartner has identified 16 technologies within a fully-fledged UC solution: telephony, unified messaging, desktop client, e-mail, instant messaging (IM), audio conferencing, collaboration, video conferencing, Web conferencing, converged conferencing, notification service, personal assistant, rich presence service, communications-enabled business processes (CEBP), contact centre and mobile solutions.

To understand the true value of this collection of applications and capabilities beyond voice savings, we must examine their common denominators – IP and the Session Initiation Protocol (SIP).

According to Research UC (www.researchuc.com), using SIP as an enterprise "session" protocol, helps standardise the interaction between communications components (voice, video, IM and e-mail) and with applications like CRM and ERP. This lets one escalate a customer interaction on e-mail to an IM or video chat, automatically create conference calls to find decision-makers during organisational disruptions, or use "presence" to choose the means, place and time we communicate, and with whom.

As a result of this choice and flexibility of UC, companies benefit greatly in productivity and efficiency – squeezing more productive minutes out of the working day whether staff are on the shop floor, behind the desk, driving or even at home.

And it can be so much more

The current state of UC is already immensely exciting, but it can be so much more. Integration of collaboration into social media, for example, excites business owners as it applies the highly intuitive and popular interfaces of social media in the pursuit of business goals.

Social UC portals could conceivably contain HR-related information and processes as well as contact lists and workgroups, enriched by presence and collaboration tools, making it extraordinarily compelling for everyday use.

Other social UC applications include integration of Twitter followers or Facebook Page fans into contact lists, integrated blogging, etc.



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Uptake is increasing

All these forms of UC are changing the way businesses communicate, market themselves and interact with customers.

Awareness is mounting as the technology's business benefits become clear, presaging increased uptake of this important technology, especially in larger companies.

Two main arguments still stand in the way – cost and quality – but they're both red herrings. While UC does require a capital outlay, the payback over five years is better than a TDM solution because of savings on maintenance; moves, adds and changes; management and other issues of resources and efficiency.

Objections to VOIP quality hark back to early VOIP offerings. If properly deployed, VOIP has no quality issues, thanks to techniques like virtual LAN circuits and quality of service prioritisation. With service providers favouring DSL lines, inter-branch connectivity must be properly managed.

The good news – start small

The good news is otherwise plentiful too. Other than the many benefits and savings already mentioned; UC solutions can start on less than you may think.

Many companies believe you cannot have UC without a VOIP service provider. But for all its benefits, a VOIP pipe is merely the equivalent of a standard Telkom ISDN line. Running ISDN on the trunk side and well managed LAN inside the organisation, you can still give your staff the freedom to set up peer-to-peer videoconferencing, fax and e-mail from their desktop clients, or set their presence to their mobile or home 'extension'.

In short, they can have UC without the need to sign up with a VOIP service provider.

** Tellumat is the South African distributor of ShoreTel systems. ShoreTel recently acquired enterprise mobility leader Agito Networks, a development of which Frost & Sullivan has said: "Agito's unique location-aware, dual-mode telephony and mobile UC applications strengthen and bring differentiation to ShoreTel's mobility portfolio, and expands its range of solutions."*