

## Go Understand Unified Communications

### What is unified communications?

In the Western world we rely heavily upon a vast array of technical devices in order to be able to communicate. These devices include PCs, laptops, telephones, mobiles, VoIP systems, PDAs and fax machines. These types of appliances enable us to communicate using the web, email, chat, instant messaging, text, video and voice. Replicate this across all or most of those devices and managing all of the functionality can become an issue.

Unified communications (also known as UC) is designed to enable users to manage all of these devices and applications through one single environment. This will simplify the whole process and users can then for example make and take all calls from a mobile phone, PDA or from a desk phone regardless where they are located and from the device that is the most accessible.

### The future of unified communications

The trend in this area is set to continue to develop and grow for a number of reasons. New and more effective methods of communication are constantly being developed, for example we now see the growth of 3G (Third Generation Mobile Network<sup>\*1</sup>) that gives greater capability and capacity to mobile phones, PDAs and their users.

Likewise, with the growth of wireless networks and hot spots business people and consumers no longer need to rely on their mobile phone when they are out of the office and the desk phone when they are in the office while only being able to have internet access when they are either at home or in the office. Everything can be done through one device, at any time and at the convenience of the user rather than where the device is located.

### Why unified communications?

Unified communications technology automates, unifies, or integrates all forms of communications with the aim of improving and maximising processes that have previously been heavily dependent on human interaction.

For example, unified communications allows for a voice message sent to a phone to be automatically forwarded to a mobile phone or sent as a text or even sent as an email to a PC or PDA.

This reduces the time to respond to calls and messages and improves the efficiency in which an individual responds. It also eliminates the need to rely on several devices, as you will now be able to access all functions from one device, thereby unifying all of those processes.

With the continued development of PDAs, PCs and thin computing to name but a few, people using unified communications can communicate to anyone, anywhere, regardless of the device that they are using and indeed the application e.g. IM (see IM in glossary), chat, voice etc.

## Benefits of unified communications

- Unified communications enable personnel to focus on communicating with customers rather than the method of communication that they are using.
- Negates the need to rely on specific devices (mobile, PDA, laptop, etc.) and dependence on specific applications, e.g. MSN, chat, text, email. This means a chat message could be received as a text message, email or voice mail etc.
- Allows users to work from the location that best meets their needs and the needs of the organisation.
- Unified communications can integrate with other systems and applications including ERP, CRM and email.
- Improved business processes and collaboration. Several people, for example, can work on a single project despite being in different locations.
- Lower mobile phone bills due to the ability to use lower cost forms of communication. For example, a huge amount of money can be wasted trying to contact a person even though they might be in the same building. Unified communications enables a user to 'track' the person and call from the nearest device.
- Improved internal communications and processes. For example, unified communications allows an individual to access a 'real-time' list of people who are accessible and with the right skills to answer a customer query or to find an appropriate resource, without the need for the customer to be put on hold until the right person is found.
- It negates the need to send an email to everyone in a company seeking advice or support as people with relevant skills can easily be highlighted, as outlined above.
- Improved customer service (see example above) enables faster response times.
- Lower risk of missing calls and responding to urgent requests.
- As remote working becomes more and more predominant, business are becoming less centralised in a single location. Unified communications facilitates better access to people and systems.
- Offers a viable alternative to business travel as people can communicate in real-time regardless of location and time-zones, using video and other media links.
- Can be tailored to individual needs e.g. the sales director travelling on a global basis will be assured that they can receive all communications in real time rather than having to wait to pick up messages and emails when they get to a hotel or office.

## Potential pitfalls

- Unified communications is still in a relatively early stage of technological evolution and it is important to be aware that any equipment purchased now needs to be compatible with future developments in communication technology.
- The system must be extremely easy to use and intuitive. If it is not, then personnel will fail to use the facilities and the benefits will never be realised.
- Any system purchased must be scalable to meet future demands and developments as well as ensuring that as more users are added, it can cope with growth.
- The system should make the most of the current communications infrastructure and devices e.g. phones and VoIP. The aim of unified communications is to maximise current technology investment as well as catering to future organisational needs.

## Six steps to successfully buying unified communications

### Step one

- Identify the needs of your organisation and users. Ascertain who uses what systems, mobiles, IM etc. and how they are used as well as individual or departmental requirements.
- Understand your requirements. Discuss with a number of solution providers or suppliers how unified communications may best benefit your organisation.
- If possible, see a live demonstration as to how unified communications systems work and how it might meet the demands of your organisation.

### Step two

- Unified communications is potentially a complex area and the more devices used the greater the complexity involved. It is important that any supplier has a deep understanding of your network, communication infrastructure, and applications.
- It is important that any unified communications installation optimises your existing technology as far as possible rather than replacing them. It is also important that any infrastructure you have in place is able to meet the current and future demand of UC in order to minimise investment.

### Step three

- Identify the right provider.

- Who has the experience of working with a company of the same size and profile as yours?
- How many similar installations have they made?
- Ask for references – ensure that the company is capable and reliable.
- Ask to speak with a couple of their customers in order to see what benefits they have realised.
- Get a credit check to ensure that they are financially stable.

#### Step four

- Request a proposal from 3 or 4 of your preferred suppliers

#### Step five

- Select a proposal.
  - Who best demonstrates that they understand your business and your technical requirements?
  - Is the solution flexible and scalable and therefore able to meet future demand? You don't want to find out later that by investing a little more money now will save you money later.
  - Is it cost effective? Does it demonstrate clearly the functional benefits – rather than telling a list of particular features, does the proposal clearly show what the benefits are? There is no point on spending money for system with features that are of no benefit or that you will never use!
  - How much will the software (licences) cost?
  - How much will the hardware cost?
  - How much will software support cost?
  - Can any savings be made by agreeing a multi-year contract for support?
  - How will your potential supplier support and maintain your system afterwards?
  - How much will this cost?
  - Have you spoken to a couple of your preferred suppliers customers?
  - Agree on financial terms – you may be required to pay a deposit but do not pay the whole amount in advance of delivery.

### **Points to remember when installing unified communications**

It is highly recommended that you have a professional company install and support your unified communications system. Integrating a large number of disparate devices can be extremely complex and therefore, unless you are technically competent, it is advisable to use a specialist company. Failure to do so could impact upon your organisation's ability to communicate.

- Make sure that the organisation has a security policy in place. This is most important as personnel need to be aware of what they can or can not use the unified communications system for, plus it must be encapsulated by the current security applications already in place, e.g. anti-virus software, firewalls etc. Multiple devices (such as PDA's) may be used to potentially introduce security weaknesses into the network that could be exploited by third parties.
- Do not be tempted to purchase the system according to the lowest price. It is important to be completely objective and purchase what best meets your current and future needs. Remember that communications systems whether email, phone, mobiles etc. are the 'life blood' of the organisation and any failure will impact people's ability to communicate both internally and externally, potentially resulting in loss of revenue.
- Legislation. You must take into consideration any legislation that your company needs to comply with, for example, financial service companies that need to have all trading records recorded for audit purposes. Failure to do so could lead to major fines or even criminal prosecution.
- Vendors and manufacturers are offering differing systems that may not be compatible. It also means that there are a number of different approaches to solve the unified communications issue. This needs to be taken into consideration when making a decision, especially as there will no doubt be further developments in both unified communications systems and ways of communicating.
- Training. Make sure that all users whom the unified communications system effect, are confident how to use and maximise its capabilities. Failure to do so can result in frustration, confusion and the system will not be used to its full potential.

## Conclusion

Unified communications is a complex technology but set to be a massive growth area because of the many benefits that it can clearly deliver.

Before embarking upon a unified communications project, it is important to understand exactly what you are trying to achieve, how it will impact the people in your organisation and your customers.

If you have a relatively simple method of communications in place such as using phones and mobiles, it may not be appropriate to purchase a full unified communications system. A far simpler method may be available to integrate the two. This may in the short-term be the most effective and low cost option.

Unified communications may encapsulate the needs of a small company but also the global giant corporate. Clearly the needs will be different, but unified communications still lends itself extremely well to the smaller organisation who perhaps do not have the budgets to employ receptionists, secretaries and the ongoing annoyance and distraction to individuals having to take calls, messages or trying to track down an individuals whereabouts.

## Glossary

\*1) 3G (3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mobile Network). The 3G network is currently replacing the second generation of digital mobile phones but allows for greater connectivity speeds for accessing the internet from mobile devices. The speeds are meant to

be similar to broadband therefore allowing faster access and greater facilities in sending emails, downloading data and other information.

## **Unified Communications - FAQ's**

### **What is unified communications?**

Unified communications is a system that allows users to access data and communications such as voicemail, email, text, chat, phone and mobile, from one device.

### **How does it work in practice?**

It allows you to do all your work from just one device. For example, have your office phone calls forwarded to your mobile phone; emails sent as a voice message to your mobile phone; or even voice messages sent as emails.

### **Why do I need it?**

It really can simplify your work life, on the basis that you will be contactable regardless of where you are and whether you are using a phone, mobile, PDA, laptop etc.

It saves people having to somehow find out where you are and what device they should use to communicate with you. Ultimately, it makes sure that you can respond to customers (and others) immediately without the typical 'time lag' that may occur if someone is trying to contact you by email and you don't have access to your laptop.

### **Is it something that I can install myself?**

No, unless you are extremely technically competent! If your unified communications system is poorly installed, you could lose all methods of contact and as a result your business could suffer.

### **What's the downside of installing unified communications?**

Potential pitfalls always exist, for example, if for some reason the system fails. However, your supplier should be able to advise you as how this can be resolved if this occurs.

### **How do I know the technology will not be out-of-date in a few years?**

You need to be realistic! In a few years time it will be surpassed by new and potentially better technology. That's the normal way with technology!

You can buy a TV or satnav and find that it's been superseded within a few months. That doesn't mean that you have to upgrade every five minutes because clearly what you've purchased is set to last a considerable time.

With technology such as unified communications, it's a good idea to ask your potential supplier if the system will be soon out of date (in our experience suppliers will tell you anyway), but make sure that it will be compatible with future developments and can meet your future growth requirements. If you worry too much about that then you'll never buy! This is a technology that is relatively

mature, its use and benefits have already been proven, and so you can be confident that it will work for you too.

### **What happens if I'm not happy with the supplier I've chosen?**

If you've done your homework this is unlikely to happen. If for some reason you can't get the support you need from your supplier, speak with the main manufacturer as they will be more than keen to make sure that their reputation is not ruined. It happens, but these days it's thankfully very, very rare.

### **How do I measure whether the system I've purchased is making me money or saving me money?**

Most suppliers will be able to outline or give you case studies that outline what return on investment (ROI) you should expect.

Depending on the technology, it may provide savings, increased revenues or sometimes both. Unified communications has the potential to provide both because you can close more business as you will be more accessible and potentially save money by lowering costs of communications. For example, many organisations reduce their mobile phone overheads simply because they can re-route calls to the nearest possible landline of the person they are trying to contact.