

Office communications at a crossroads

Unified communications and collaboration (UCC) is considered by many to be a promising tool for optimizing business processes. Best Practice asked two experts for their opinion on the opportunities and risks associated with this radical change in communications.

For

Unified communications and collaboration (UCC) solutions make it easier to contact people, and enable better teamwork.

UCC solutions consolidate multiple communications channels via a single user-friendly interface. As a result, communications become quicker and easier – helping to accelerate business processes. Web and video conferencing solutions, for example, cut travel time and costs significantly. And the less time employees spend on the road or in the air, the more productively they can work. Virtual meetings cut costs and reduce the corporate ecological footprint – because reduced travel means fewer carbon emissions.

But UCC is not limited to the workplace or to telephony, email and videoconferencing. As is often the case, personal communications have been leading the way. Young people in particular leverage email, instant messaging, text messages, cell phones and social networking platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, simultaneously. And as the generation of digital natives enters employment, they will continue to use these familiar methods of communicating, and everyone will have to adopt them. And that's where UCC solutions come in – providing the flexibility to integrate a variety of channels. But companies will have to lay down certain ground rules for users, creating clear boundaries between personal and business communications.

Anytime, anyplace availability

One of the major benefits of UCC is that users can be reached quickly and easily, wherever they are – for example, thanks to a single phone number for both landline and cell phones, at the office or on the move, instant messaging, and functions that indicate who is online at any given time. As a result, staff can provide better customer service and work faster – important success factors in a world where speed is key. In the past, we'd expect a response to a letter within two weeks. Now, we want replies to our emails, faxes and text messages within a matter of hours – if not sooner.

Another important feature of integrated communications is that we have anytime, anywhere access to knowledge and data. This is particularly important for international teams working in different time zones.

When UCC really takes off, businesses will be at a disadvantage if they do not implement the necessary solutions. Unified communications will become a key factor when it comes to keeping ahead of the competition.

At present, there is no one-size-fits-all answer, so companies need a skilled ICT partner to implement a UCC solution that works effectively, and really meets their needs.



“With UCC, staff can provide better customer service and work faster.”

Andreas Zilch, Member of the Management Board, Experton Group

Links: www.experton-group.com
www.t-systems.com/unified-communications
www.t-systems.com/unified-communications-series

Against

Without an honest analysis of a company's real needs, UCC can prompt a counterproductive "cultural revolution" in communications.

To say that UCC has absolutely no chance of success would be an exaggeration. But the sheer complexity of any UCC project demands thorough preparation on the part of the company and the UCC provider. And it requires no-holds-barred honesty about what is truly possible and what people truly want. Otherwise, a potential blessing can quickly morph into a burden.

The first step is to make a frank assessment of actual needs. Only then is it possible to decide whether and to what degree UCC is the right choice. In-depth analysis of the existing infrastructure (phone systems, network components, providers, etc.) is imperative. Is it easier and more cost-effective to integrate the solution with the existing infrastructure? Does this offer a better return on investment than a rip-out and replace approach? What does the customer really want? And how does the customer work (teamwork, style of management, etc.)? Only when I have this information can I give an honest appraisal of the benefits or ROI of UCC – and every company is entitled to honest answers from their service provider.

The second point concerns employees' working practices and preferences. Developments in office communications have already led to massive changes in behavior (e.g. phone, e-mail). Now, innovative UCC systems are taking things a step further by providing information on staff availability. Being able to see who is at their desk at any given moment could put staff under pressure to be present and accessible at all times. UCC implies permanent availability – and this could be misconstrued as an indicator of performance.

Moreover, near permanent availability will naturally lead to more frequent interruptions – significantly impacting concentration. There is a very real risk of workers responding to difficult situations spontaneously rather than thinking things through – and the quality of their work may suffer as a result.

Danger of boycott by staff

My final point concerns the motivation for actually implementing the software. The way people work often conflicts with the way the software works (for example, the success of CRM depends upon a team-driven, group process; but CRM often runs up against an individualistic mentality). If an IT department fails to clearly communicate the benefits of UCC, for example, in terms of collaboration, staff may boycott or sidestep the technology altogether – disrupting their work and calling into question the business benefits of UCC.

To highlight the advantages of integrated communications (e.g. in terms of streamlining processes), it is crucial to educate people on how to use it best. If a company or its provider cannot do this, then they will fail to achieve their aims. After all, UCC is a matter of culture. Businesses that are ready and willing to embrace the cultural revolution that UCC undoubtedly means for office communications must prepare the ground well.

Photos: reinhard rosendahl fotografie (left), Ralph Sondermann (right).



“UCC implies permanent availability – and this could be misconstrued as an indicator of performance.”

Achim Heisler, 42,
President
of A-H-S Computer

Links: www.a-h-s.info
Video: www.t-systems.com/video/unified-communications