Understanding the value of unified comms

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As unified communication technologies mature, the focus is shifting from making a business case for UC to concrete and tangible deployment issues. To succeed, it is critical that business leaders, IT managers and planners understand where UC solutions offer value and how they improve competitiveness. UC is designed to eliminate the barriers that have traditionally separated voice calls, email, instant messaging and conferencing in all forms. Once these communication media are carried over a common IP network, it is possible to manage them from a single point and use them with common devices, enabling companies to transform key business processes with improved communication flows.

In addition to integrating communication channels - both within the enterprise and with key constituents - UC offers a way to integrate communication functions directly into business applications. Gartner calls this capability communications-enabled business processes (CEBP). By 2012, 80 percent of leading organisations will have adopted some form of CEBPs for competitive improvement.

The largest single value in UC lies in its ability to reduce human latency within corporate processes and improve a business' ability to respond and be agile. Integrating communication functions directly into systems and applications individuals use is particularly effective at reducing human latency.

For instance, if CEBPs enable an engineer to fix a fault on a production line 30 minutes faster than would be possible otherwise, the benefit is the 30-minute savings and the value of restarting the line faster, which is likely to prevent a delay amounting to thousands of dollars per hour. Gartner's definitions

Gartner divides UC into three functional areas:

* Personal UC is geared toward the individual and includes smart phones, PDAs and other types of devices. These provide access to voice, instant messaging, presence information and business applications. Presence provides information about the availability and status of individuals or shared resources. This form of UC is geared toward supporting individual or personal productivity. For instance, rich presence (which shows the availability of individuals across multiple channels, such as instant messaging, phone, mobile phone and video) enables individuals to be more productive because it simplifies their work tasks. In addition, when applied in other ways, it can support collaboration work and enterprise-wide objectives.

* Work-group unified communications is oriented toward supporting collaborative and team efforts. Examples of ways to improve performance include the use of presence to speed identification of an individual with the right skills to address a problem, the use of business rules to route or escalate communications, or the use of virtual meeting rooms to speed rapid-response teams.

* Enterprise UC integrates communications with enterprise-wide and department-level applications, business processes and workflows. An example of this is credit-card authorisation. When a bank receives a request for a credit authorisation, an application reviews the request in real time. If the transaction is outside the credit-card holder's usual behaviour, it is flagged as being at high risk of fraud. The system makes an outbound notification to the credit-card holder (phone, email, SMS). If the system succeeds in reaching the card holder, they will be requested to confirm their identity. As a result, instead of rejecting a transaction from a valued customer, the bank can allow the transaction, improving the service and reducing its and the client's fraud exposure. Where to find UC

Products that support elements of UC include voice over IP (VoIP) systems, email, audio and Web conferencing, videoconferencing, voice mail, unified messaging and instant messaging. These are all evolving rapidly toward integration, but each is also developing in its own way. For instance, voice, video and Web conferencing capabilities will converge and, instant messaging's presence capabilities will expand to all live channels, including voice, conferencing, video and email.

Not all architectures will be optimum, nor will all survive. Solutions from vendors such as IBM and Microsoft will focus on how to expand from their email and Web-conferencing base to encompass the broader UC portfolio, while solutions from Avaya, Siemens, Cisco, Alcatel and Nortel will use the voice products as the foundation to their UC offering.

Because no single vendor has all of the elements needed for a complete solution, new partnerships are also redefining the market. Examples include Microsoft and Nortel, which have created a relationship called the Innovative Communications Alliance to partner on UC products and solutions, and IBM's relationship with Cisco for UC product collaboration.

 All these companies not only compete against each other in one or more UC product categories, but also work together to provide complete portfolios to clients. The UC market will consolidate, and some of the partnerships will turn into battles, while others will evolve into tightly unified solutions.

 The complexity of UC and lack of industry experience means that organisations will have to plan carefully to avoid failures and meet expectations. Best practices will be critical to success. They include initially focusing on a subset of UC functionality, ensuring that key stakeholders are involved in the planning, providing plenty of user training, conducting extended pilot periods, measuring success and failure of initial trials, and finally learning from early experiences and pilots.