



END-USERS CAN MAKE OR BREAK THE SUCCESS OF A UC PROJECT

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There is little doubt about the proliferation of technology into every facet of human communication today. In the business world as well as our personal lives, communication has been dramatically changed forever by a broad range of new or more advanced technologies. The young people of today are right on top of the technology – looking at communication in a whole new light. One recent source claimed that 65% of teenagers sleep with their cell phone under their pillow to ensure that they don't miss out on any incoming text message or call. While business today appears somewhat reluctant to embrace the concept of availability anytime, anywhere, young people entering the workforce will see the concept as a necessity, not just a convenience.

In the business world, the convergence of voice and data – as well as video and mobility – has evolved into unified communications. UCStrategies.com defines unified communications as “Communications integrated to optimize business processes”, but in many ways, UC has emerged as an enabler that is difficult to pigeonhole. As stated earlier, it encompasses voice, data, video, mobility, and more. It can be located on site (premise-based) or it can be delivered/hosted from the “cloud” (remotely/off-site). Most important, UC ensures that information is available and people are reachable anytime, anywhere on almost any device of their choosing. The Yankee Group also recently highlighted the strategic significance of UC solutions: “A user experience for audio, video, Web, and data collaboration that breaks down all distance, time, and media barriers, and allows people to communicate with one another anywhere, anytime, and across any medium from multiple endpoints”.

According to Art Rosenberg, member of the UCStrategies.com team of industry experts, consultants and analysts, it is important to understand that communication is not just person-to-person. It can also be to and from a process to a person. And the key today is to ensure that communication devices used by the end-user are multi-modal (i.e. able to deal with both internal and external communications, real-time and non-real-time communications, input via voice and the keypad, etc.). It would seem that there is much more to unified communications than meets the eye. Yet one issue is very strong – no matter what form unified communication takes – user-focused or business process focused – the UC “activity” involves the end-user and the tools (“end-points”) that they use on a daily basis. IP handset, mobile device, wireless headset, soft phone or other end point devices.... the tools are only effective if the end-user makes use of them.

Economic Motivation

Despite a troubled economy and of its ramifications, there has never been a better time for unified communication solutions, from a business perspective. Certainly, data VARs and telecom dealers have seen a significant decrease in the sales of data hardware and PBX's, as companies tighten their budgets and cancel projects. The two events that drove PBX sales in the past – a company moving its location or growing beyond the capacity of its existing phone system – are not often encountered in the current economic environment. Yet, there are VARs and telecom dealers who are thriving today based upon the changed needs of customers. Various UC solutions are exactly what many companies

require as they seek to maintain production levels and customer service with a smaller work workforce, tighten the budget by reducing expenses, maintain a competitive edge with fewer resources, and still meet the needs of a growing remote and/or mobile workforce.

The strongest value of UC, from a business perspective, comes from that integration of communications with actual business processes. For almost any organization in any industry, operations can be significantly improved by changing how communications tools are used and by eliminating those places where the operational activities are blocked, delayed, or complicated by communications issues (termed “communication hot spots”). The types of activities or functions that can be improved via UC solutions include:

- Anytime, anywhere in an organization that there are processes or projects that require approvals in order to complete or continue the process. For example, the application process for a home mortgage. Or an insurance application. Or consider the hospital process to get a patient admitted.
- Anywhere in an organization where some sort of consultative process exists. It could be to analyze data for R&D, negotiate an issue or a contract, or reach a decision for the business.
- Anytime there are remote workers or mobile workers who need to call or message for information. One example is sales people on the road who need to place orders, find order status for their customers, etc. But this could also include executives who are traveling and need to access company information prior to a meeting. According to a recent Plantronics study of Fortune 1000 companies, approximately 63% of the workforce fall into the categories of telecommuters or roadwarriors.
- Anytime there are ongoing collaborative processes – to make management decisions, for example; or to deal with legal issues. Or among doctors who need to consult with other doctors. Or teachers across a school district working together on course development. Or engineers in multiple locations working together to develop a new product.
- Anytime a project or process is delayed or stopped for lack of a specific resource, someone with a particular skill, or a specific person. The hospital environment is an excellent example of needing a specific resource – perhaps a specialty doctor – before a decision can be made about patient care.
- Anytime workers in their normal activities are being interrupted for information, to answer questions, etc. To give an example, someone in a purchasing department who is frequently interrupted for status on various purchase orders. Or a teacher who is interrupted outside of class with questions about homework assignments.
- With customer service so important to many companies – and a competitive differentiator for many – it is important that customers receive prompt responses. However, all too often, callers are placed on hold for extended periods.

At this early stage of unified communications, many of the UC implementations are for user-focused solutions, i.e. enhancing user productivity, rather than business process-focused solutions. The business need for various UC

solutions has never been stronger, yet solutions integrators (VARs and telecom dealers providing UC solutions) are finding that IT managers seem reluctant to venture into communication technology and CFO's are often unsure of the value of investing in UC solutions appropriate for their own business. According to Chris Wortt, VoIP Sales Manager at Polycom, a leading manufacturer of voice and video products, "The key is to provide a solution that delivers true value to the [organization] and its individual users." While this may sound relatively straightforward, the process of providing a solution must be well thought out.

Driving to Successful Implementations of UC

How important is assessing and planning to the success of a UC implementation? Dimension Data (www.dimensiondata.com), an international systems integrator, has created a "[UC Development Model](#)" to guide their customers in identifying their specific needs and developing a roadmap for their own unified communication strategy. The model plots an organization against a set of operational and strategic competencies to determine the organization's current level of "maturity" as well as their goals for the future.

To strengthen the value of assessing and planning for a successful UC solution implementation, the norm today is to begin the implementation of almost any UC solution with a "pilot" project, rather than a full roll out. In many cases, a particular line of business or function – such as sales – is selected as the "pilot". According to Bill Vollerthum, president of Enabling Technologies, the value of a pilot or proof of concept project cannot be minimized. The strategy that Vollerthum outlined includes:

- Minimize the customer's perceived risk by providing proof of concept (POC) on a smaller scale with a minimum investment
- Lay a strong foundation through careful architecture planning and design
- Set proper expectations
- Encourage acceptance by defining the participants for the POC, providing the solution to those who will most benefit from its implementation and/or those who are most open to change or adjustments in how they use their daily communication tools. The members of this group then become the champions of the solution – selling its benefits to others in the organization.
- Identify and work through any implementation issues on this smaller scale rather than on the larger scale of a full roll out

The Critical Importance of User Acceptance

All of the careful planning, the value of a solution to the business, the possibilities created by technology mean little if the end-user does not or will not use the tools that UC can provide. In the UC industry, there are lengthy discussions about what UC is and isn't, how solutions should be deployed, who should deploy the solutions, and more. But the area that often receives the least attention and yet is one of the most important elements for the success of any UC implementation is end-user acceptance. Even integrators, when designing a UC solution, have been known to overlook some of the "end point" devices that can facilitate the user acceptance that can make or break a UC implementation. Sometimes the experience and acceptance hinge on something as physically small as a headset and other audio tools. Softphones and headsets allow end-users to join calls or collaborate with their colleagues

directly from their PC. Noise-canceling headsets enable them to take those calls that find them “any time, anywhere”. Bluetooth and multi-use headsets allow them to communicate hands free across multiple devices, platforms and applications. Today’s technology enables an end-user to answer – hands free – calls from their PC, land line, or cell phone with a single headset and at the click of one button.

Experienced integrators are careful to consider end-points right up front as an important element of any UC solution. Provide a great end-user experience and acceptance of the new solution is almost assured. Conversely, move the end-user too far out of their comfort zone and a disaster looms. Savvy integrators ensure that the end-user is not overlooked in the planning and the implementation. They understand that any new business tool is only effective if the customer’s employees use it! In a recent UC blog on [“6 Steps for Deploying UC to End-Users”](#) Tom Pacyk talks about the importance of preparing the users for the new tools, training, gathering feedback, etc.

The importance of the end-user is illustrated in Dimension Data’s UC Development Model, presented earlier. One of the six operational competencies that DiData examines for a customer is “user adoption”. And among the six strategic areas examined are “user segmentation” and “user experience”.

Taking notice of the end-user experience is not just the responsibility of the integrator; it is also important for the customer’s IT group. According to a recent Information Week article [“UC: Big Promise, Modest Movement”](#), written by Jeremy Littlejohn, “In reality, IT often brings problems on itself by ignoring the end-user experience” Littlejohn also suggests that “....getting employees to actually use UC applications is the single largest factor in a successful rollout and in achieving ROI...”

The Role of Ease of Use

According to industry expert Art Rosenberg, a member of the UCStrategies.com team, “The ability to exploit UC depends on end-user acceptance”. And some manufacturers are achieving great success from focusing on the end-user. While some focus on UC applications or network infrastructure, others such as Plantronics (www.plantronics.com), a leading manufacturer of headsets and other audio devices, have built a successful business from attention to the “end-user experience” that is so important to user acceptance of new tools and technology. Those manufacturers who provide various elements of a UC solution have recognized the importance of the end-user experience and chosen to partner with Plantronics, for example, to ensure the overall acceptance of their applications and appliances in a customer implementation. At the end of the day, when an end-user is faced with a new “productivity enhancing tool”, what they really want to know is whether that tool is easy to learn and easy to use.

Ease of use, however, is important to more than just end-user acceptance of new technology tools. In February 2009, Wainhouse Research (www.wainhouse.com) introduced a study on the importance of ease of use for web conferencing – “Ease of Use in Web Conferencing – Why It Matters”. The basic principles would seem to apply to any UC situation involving the end-user. The study involved IT managers from a variety of industries. On a scale of 1 – 5, with 1 being “disagree” and 5 being “highly agree”, the participants responded to questions about the impact of ease of use, from a business perspective. Their responses to the statement “Saves training time and money” averaged 4.65. Their responses to the statement “Saves support time and cost” averaged 4.48. Participant responses averaged 4.26 on the statement “An offering with fewer features but greater ease of use can be of higher value than one with more features that is complex to use”. Finally, in the Wainhouse study, when asked to rate the value of various factors when choosing a web conferencing supplier, the participants rated “ease of use” #1, ahead of reliability, price, feature set and brand reputation. Overall, the study supported the fact that there are definite cost benefits for the customer when their end-users are provided with tools that have been designed for ease of use.

The point, of course, is that there is a direct correlation between ease of use, the user experience, and user acceptance. Companies providing the primary parts of UC solutions – Cisco, Microsoft, IBM, Avaya, Siemens, and others – seem to be ensuring the success of solutions developed with their products by partnering with companies like Plantronics that focus on the end-user and the end-user experience. A study conducted by Plantronics, surveying UC gatekeepers at US Fortune 1000 companies, indicated that UC audio/voice endpoint devices are considered important to the overall UC experience. In the study 61% of respondents indicated that the endpoint devices were a very important part of the remote workers overall UC experience and 56% indicated the same level of importance for call center worker UC experience.

Unified communications touches and addresses a workforce that is more diverse than ever – mobile workers, remote workers, and office workers who are generally using more than one hand-held device (cell phone, desk handset, and soft phone). While users can now be reached anytime anywhere, the process of an end-user making that actually happen could be frustrating if the tools aren't intuitive and easy to use. And don't forget “flexible”. How is the end-user experience improved in an environment where thousands or hundreds of thousands of dollars are spent on UC applications for improving user productivity or to facilitate the integration of communication into business processes? Ask the end-user who is using a headset and other audio tools as they collaborate with their colleagues across the globe on a new product design. Or ask the roadwarrior making their way through a busy airport as they complete a key business transaction thanks to a noise canceling headset.

More About the End-User Experience

Considerable time has been spent discussing ease of use and its role in the overall end-user experience. However, there are other factors in creating that experience as well. Companies that develop handsets can attest to the importance of ergonomic design as well as basic visual appeal. Large PBX sales have been won or lost based upon whether or not the CEO liked the look of a manufacturer's handset on his/her desk. Companies such as Plantronics – manufacturing primarily headsets – have design teams that look at numerous aspects of design. According to the Plantronics website, “Plantronics Design treats the human form as a canvas from which to begin the inspiration process. The team's expertise in human behavior and anatomy, ergonomics, color, proportion and complex surface development converge in the design of advanced products that look beautiful and become extensions of the body. By marrying the intricacies of sound innovation with the intimacy of personal fashion and comfort, Plantronics Design enables people to express their style preferences and individuality through headsets.” Plantronics also has a “wall of ears” so that they can test their headset products on a large variety of shapes and sizes, to ensure the comfort of the end-user and guide the success of one element of the end-user experience.

Training and User Acceptance

Of course training cannot be overlooked or minimized in the success of user acceptance of UC solutions. While some endpoint devices may be completely intuitive and/or very easy to use, the overall tools offered by unified communication solutions and applications generally require training time. However, given the large number of remote and mobile workers today, training can be a challenge. How are they to be trained? How are their training questions to be answered? What will guarantee that they will take the time for the training that may be a necessity for the successful use/acceptance of the UC tools available to them? These questions seem to point back to “ease of use” to facilitate a positive user experience – which in turn is necessary for the success of any UC application.

When all is said and done, it is often the small details that make the biggest difference.

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Pam Avila, the founder of Sierra Summit Group, has a strong background in sales and marketing management with significant companies in both telecom (AT&T, ROLM, US West) and data (HP, Sun Microsystems, and Novell). Her business experience includes building and managing successful sales organizations – both direct and those selling through channels. Pam is best known for turning around under-achieving sales organizations and taking them to a position of success. Her channel expertise comes from both managing channel sales organizations and mentoring a nationwide group of “convergence” VARs and telecom dealers, for which she received industry-wide recognition. As the founder of SSG, Pam is credited, among other successes, with developing the channel strategy that has taken one IP telephony manufacturer from virtually unknown to being in the top 10 in market share. Pam has a unique background and a strong record of success.

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