Introduction

Organisations today are faced with many challenges. It’s a highly competitive world in which our customers have many choices when it comes to buying any goods and services.

Retaining existing customers, controlling costs and seeking competitive advantage have always been difficult goals and a challenging economic environment only adds to that difficulty.

Many companies and organisations however, thrive in such circumstances and this guide seeks to show one way of achieving those goals through the effective use of communications.

There can be no doubt that the pace of technological developments and change within the communications world has accelerated in recent times – the Internet alone has demonstrated this to us all and opened up a myriad of commercial opportunities – and threats for business.

For small to medium enterprises (SMEs), often without in-house technical skills and experience to determine which communications products and applications are best suited to their business, the prospect of using technology for commercial advantage can be daunting.

Get it right and the business could be transformed. Get it wrong and it could be an expensive mistake that could have more than a financial cost.
In today's challenging environment, organisations need to get more work done with less resources and time.

One solution many successful companies have considered and deployed is Unified Communications.

Unified Communications (UC) is the integration of real-time communication services such as instant messaging (chat), presence information (seeing who is online), video conferencing, call control and speech recognition with non-real-time communication services such as unified messaging (integrated voicemail, e-mail, SMS and fax). UC is not a single product, but a set of products that provides a consistent unified user interface and user experience across multiple devices and media types.

UC also refers to a trend to offer business process integration, i.e. to simplify and integrate all forms of communications in view to optimise business processes and reduce the response time, manage flows, and eliminate device and media dependencies.

In its broadest sense, UC can encompass all forms of communications that are exchanged via IP network.

UC allows an individual to send a message on one medium and receive the same communication on another medium. For example, one can receive a voicemail message and choose to access it through e-mail or a mobile phone. If the sender is online according to the presence information and currently accepts calls, the response can be sent immediately through text chat or video call. Otherwise, it may be sent as a non real-time message such as email that can be accessed through a variety of media.

Key Considerations

Some UC solutions are all encompassing monolithic products that require not only very sophisticated deployment and integrations skills but also a high degree of in house skills to maintain and leverage the investments made.

Our advice, unless you are prepared for this eventuality, is to consider with your chosen supplier the type of applications that you use today, those you may want to use in the future, and the real benefits your organisation will derive from unifying those applications.

For most organisations a list that includes the unification of applications such as advanced call processing, voicemail, unified messaging, personal assistant, fax, speech, and notification has been proven to transform productivity.

Please also consider interoperability with your existing infrastructure of telephone system, e-mail system and data systems. Leverage these existing investments and still increase productivity, rather than spend money to replace parts of your existing communications infrastructure.
One technology trap that many organisations fall into is to individually purchase ‘best of breed’ single issue applications that turn out not to ‘talk’ to each other. It’s like having many little island or pools of information that whilst useful in their own right would be so much more powerful if they worked together. For example, there's little point in having a Call Management product that cannot ‘talk’ to or integrate with a call recording application.

Usually by the time this error has been discovered it’s too late and the money has been spent.

A far better strategy for the applications you need to enhance and/or augment those that come as a standard part of your telephony communications package is to consider interoperability – the full integration with existing investments and potential other applications required in the future.

One solution may be to consider a ‘suite’ of applications developed by a single supplier that has tested and proved them to be able to work not only together but on the widest possible range of core communications systems and platforms.

**Benefits**

1. Typically a suite of applications can provide the building blocks that will support your business - growing with it and changing with you and with the times.

2. You can install and deploy the applications at a pace that suits your business and your budget.

3. A similar ‘look and feel’ for all applications builds user confidence.

4. Often a general configuration in one application will be applied throughout the suite, for example, a security setting for access to information.

5. With integration and interoperability comes combined power for additional productivity benefits and management information.

In today's highly competitive markets the effective use of technology can deliver competitive advantage – get it wrong and it could be expensive in more ways than one.
Implementations

Once you have made the decision to invest in a new communications platform and a set of applications to meet the current and future needs of your organisation the next steps to take are installation, training and ultimately realising the return on investment you have made through increased productivity or whatever the driver for the purchase was.

Installations

Tell your staff what is happening and why the communications systems are being upgraded. You will need their ‘buy-in’ to realise all the benefits downstream.

Agree a schedule of works with your chosen supplier. Be aware that not all suppliers employ their own installation and implementation crews and rarely do they have their own product trainers. Most outsource these tasks to specialist organisations who are experts in these fields. It's just another example of the diversification of labour.

Make a check list of all the features of the new systems that you agreed with the supplier so that everyone knows what you are expecting on day one of the systems going live and what you are expecting to be implemented subsequently.

Make sure you are thoroughly trained on the systems and applications. Even though products today are highly intuitive to someone say versed in Microsoft Office, you won’t get the best out of the new products if you are unsure what they are capable of.

If you are expecting to see a return on investment make sure you are in a position to measure it. It’s a fact that most end users do not actually measure the results they are getting from new applications purchased.

If you were promised a 30% increase in say calls answered in under 30 seconds then find out what you are achieving and if it is less than the target figure, ask why.

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