



Just What is Unified Communications, Exactly?

by Richard
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We hear from our readers that they're confused over what exactly Unified Communications (UC) is. Even some industry analysts use the term UC to categorize IP PBX vendors. And many IP PBX vendors themselves claim they have a "unified communications" platform, when in reality it is an IP-based Telephony solution designed to replace a legacy PBX and possibly integrate into other products that make up the UC system.

When analysts write their reports and categorize vendors, you can only wonder how something like Asterisk and its commercial "forks" can be categorized as UC, since it doesn't have calendar, email, instant messaging, presence servers, or mobile extensions. How is that a UC system?

Obviously, as a marketing term, UC is "hot" and so it gets applied to non-UC platforms. The term UC is therefore becoming 'diluted'. Some clarification is necessary.

Part of the problem is that many people still confuse unified communications with unified messaging (UM), which appeared in the computer telephony era of the 1990s. Unified messaging systems collect emails, voicemails and faxes and place them in a single "inbox" accessed periodically on the desktop by an end user.

First of all, UC can call upon more types of communications than UM: instant messaging, telephony, video, email, voicemail, and short message services, whiteboarding and so forth. Unlike UM, UC eliminates "latency" by emphasizing real-time delivery of communications. This is made possible via an

expanded form of the concept of "presence", which doesn't exist at all in UM. A simple example of presence is the instant messaging "buddy list" which indicates whether a person is available for a chat. UC systems use more sophisticated forms of presence so that real-time communications can occur based on a preferred method, personal schedule, available device and recipient location. Moreover, in contact center scenarios, "presence" also includes a person's skill-set so that a contact center agent can call upon the expertise of an individual somewhere in the company (or somewhere in the world) so as to achieve first-call resolution and customer satisfaction.

Finally, unlike UM which is relegated to the desktop,

In total, UC brings various forms of communications a person has at their disposal into real time and coordinates them, making it easy for individuals to collaborate and ultimately integrating communication functions directly with business applications; Gartner calls this capability "communications-enabled business processes", with a workflow or process application automatically identifying an appropriate resource at the point in the business activity where one is needed.



unified communications is increasingly associated with mobility and Fixed-Mobile Convergence (FMC). IP PBX functionality can be extended to mobile devices, and dual-mode phones allow for seamless transitions between WiFi and cellular services. Indeed, some experts say that we should use a new term, Mobile Unified Communications.

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Providers of unified communications platforms and services are focusing more effort and attention on developing and marketing applications that target specific enterprise user needs, a strategy shift that will significantly impact ongoing UC sector development, according to a new report, “The Key to UC Revenue Success: It’s the Apps,” published by Light Reading’s VOIP Services Insider service (www.lightreading.com/entvoip).

Other key findings of the report include the following:

- Fixed/mobile convergence and collaboration are two of the most popular UC applications today.
- Rich media with HD audio and video is one of the “hot” applications expected to pick up speed over the next 12 to 18 months.

Keep these characteristics in mind when shopping for a (hopefully) genuine unified communications system. Otherwise you may just end up with an IP PBX having a lot of features.

Richard Grigonis is Executive Editor of TMC’s IP Communications Group.

News from CommuniGate Systems

CommuniGate Systems, a major player in carrier-class mobile unified communications, recently announced availability of Pronto! 2.2, a unified communications user interface which provides network operators with a client framework to deliver value-added services for rich media communications and advanced collaboration in the Software as a Service (SaaS) model. The framework is built with Adobe® Flex® 3, deployed in the browser with Adobe Flash® Player and to the desktop with Adobe® AIR™

The new Pronto! version 2.2 offers VideoMail, advanced collaboration via presence and integrated VoIP for Firefox, Opera and Apple Safari browsers.

“There is a growing market need for solutions that can deliver the many advantages of unified communications to enterprises through a SaaS delivery model,” says Sara Radicati, CEO of The Radicati Group, Inc. “Messaging and collaboration platforms that can integrate video, voice and more into an effective solution are particularly in demand in the market today”.

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