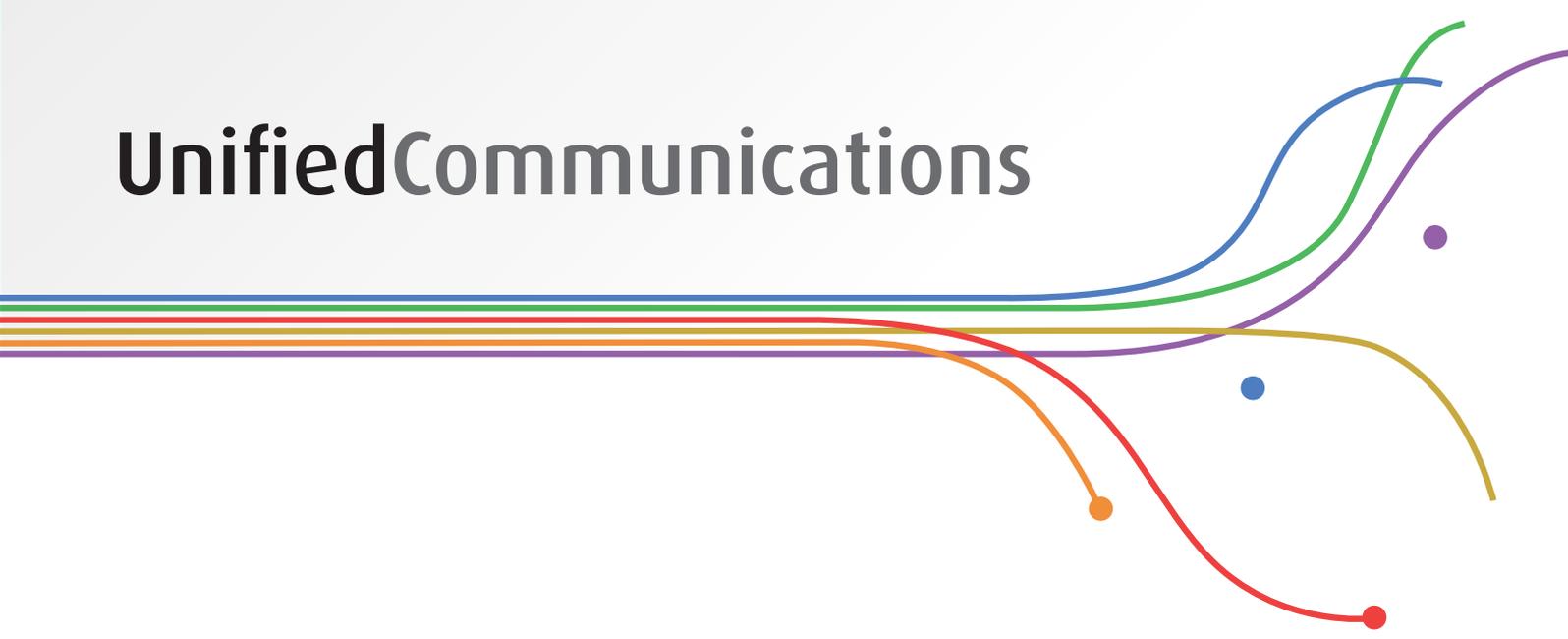


# Unified Communications



# Introduction

During recent decades, the way consumers access, transfer and receive information has changed dramatically. While immensely beneficial, the rise in popularity of personal information devices such as home computers and mobile phones, along with the development of the internet and e-mail, has led to information channels becoming increasingly fragmented.

With users able to quickly and easily switch from device to device, and between media, inefficient working patterns are commonplace. Consequently, bringing telephones and computers together to create new technologies and information products – known as Unified Communications – has provided affordable and powerful solutions to businesses of all shapes and sizes.



## Challenges in communications today

New innovations in technology have opened up communication channels, with people now able to quickly contact one another from across the globe, simply at the touch of a button. Such advancement has changed the way we communicate, both personally and professionally, however managing multiple streams in a business context presents a big challenge.

### Managing multiple communications

Professionals can find it difficult to manage multiple communications systems such as computers, mobile phones, e-mail, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), voicemail, instant messaging, and web and video conferencing. This is largely due to the fact that the communication tools, while individually valuable, do not necessarily 'talk' to each other and aid day-to-day duties.

Even something as simple as making a phone call is not as seamless an operation as it could be – the worker must leave their current application, go to the address book to find the contact details, and then dial the number on the phone. In many ways this represents a waste of valuable time and a more efficient process where all the information required is close to hand and can be accessed more quickly, is how organisations should be looking to fine-tune their one-to-one and mass communications.

### A disconnected marketplace

Despite working for the same company, staff are not necessarily based in the same building, city or even country; Companies now have offices all over the world and customers and partners are equally spread out. This physical disconnection can lead to a lack of interaction with colleagues, customers and suppliers – an unhealthy situation for any company which can lead to reduced sales, less customer loyalty, and lower profitability. With companies looking at new ways to gain an advantage over competitors and increase profits by reducing time-to-market for products and services, effective communications with distant stakeholders is crucial. Communicating on such a wide scale can be logistically and financially challenging, particularly in terms of face-to-face meetings where a significant amount of time is spent travelling to and from an often far-flung location. A failure to address this issue can result in delays to projects, increased travel and communications costs, ultimately leading to a drop in productivity.



# Challenges in communications today

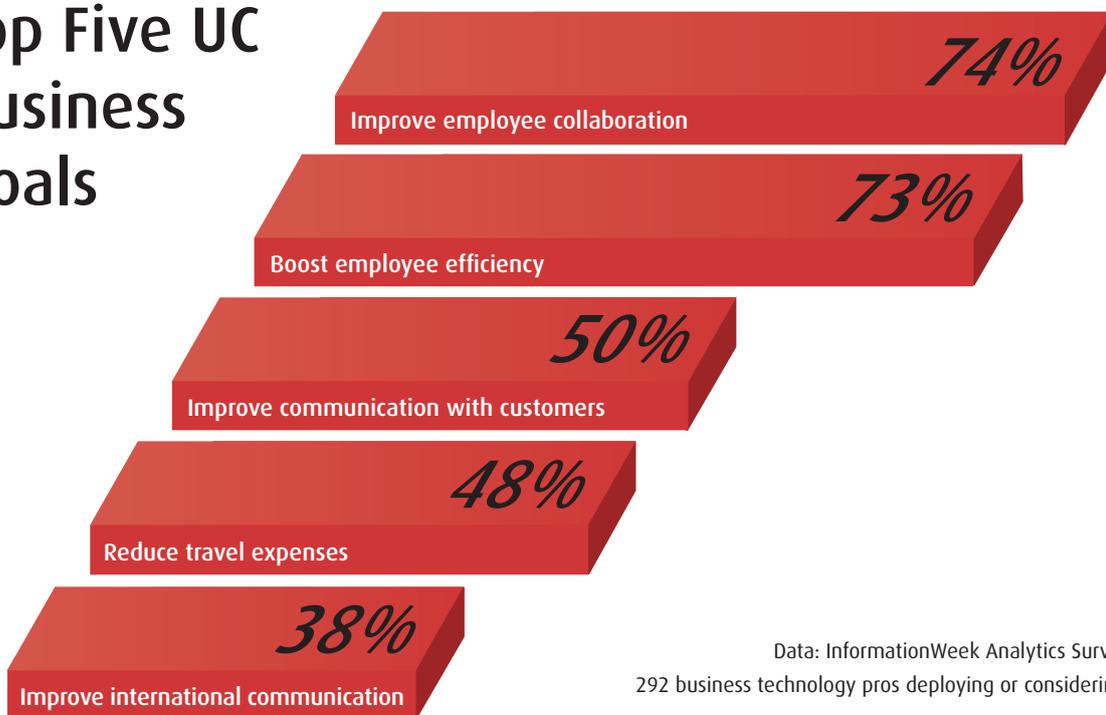
## Expensive modes of communication

Traditional communications such as fax and voicemail systems can leave companies with high running costs due to long-distance call charges and ongoing maintenance fees. Add to this travel expenses and company margins can be significantly reduced. As every business is focused on the bottom line, new cost-effective modes of communication need to be implemented. However, rather than just increasing efficiency and saving money, new methods need to be easy to use, fully accessible and free from additional costs in relation to IT support and further staff requirements.

## A fragmented network

Multiple applications from multiple vendors that run right across a company's internal communications system make information management extremely time-consuming and challenging. The installation and updating of systems can be a real headache for IT departments as they struggle to operate and maintain a disparate and complex network of phone, voicemail, email and instant messaging.

## Top Five UC Business Goals



Data: InformationWeek Analytics Survey of 292 business technology pros deploying or considering UC



# What is Unified Communications?

Unified Communications is an ever-changing body of technologies that combines and automates human and device communications in order to optimise business processes by reducing time-delays, managing workflows, and eradicating device and media dependencies.

E-mail, calendars, telephony, directory services and real-time communications can now be integrated, bringing communication capabilities to an exciting new level. Unified Communications isn't, however, purely an operation reserved for large enterprises; even the smallest businesses can now implement powerful and affordable tools to gain greater employee productivity, lower IT management costs and enhanced functionality.





# Elements of Unified Communications

Generally speaking, Unified Communications consists of five key elements:

- **Presence.**

Allows the end user to inform others of their availability status in real-time, i.e. if they are available to communicate and by which method (for example, 'I'm available after 14:00 by phone call only'). This is particularly useful across complex and geographically dispersed organisations as it cuts down on wasted attempts to contact individuals and greatly enhances efficiency, particularly in the area of time management.

- **Messaging.**

Where all forms of communication – including e-mail, fax, text messaging and voicemail – along with calendars and contact details, are brought together in a unified inbox. This allows users to seamlessly switch back and forth between different modes of communication without closing and opening applications copying and pasting details from one application to another, for example.

- **Instant messaging.**

Allows users to communicate in text format through computers or smart phones. This can either be carried out to external partners or between internal colleagues through a corporate network. By developing a customised system, employees can benefit from a quick and highly secure communication channel.

- **Conferencing.**

A popular method of communication for businesses looking to reduce the need for travel while at the same time maintaining a close relationship with employees, customers and partners who could be spread across the globe. This allows multiple individuals to interact through simultaneous audio and video (audio-video conferencing) or audio and presentations over the internet (web conferencing).

- **Software powered VoIP.**

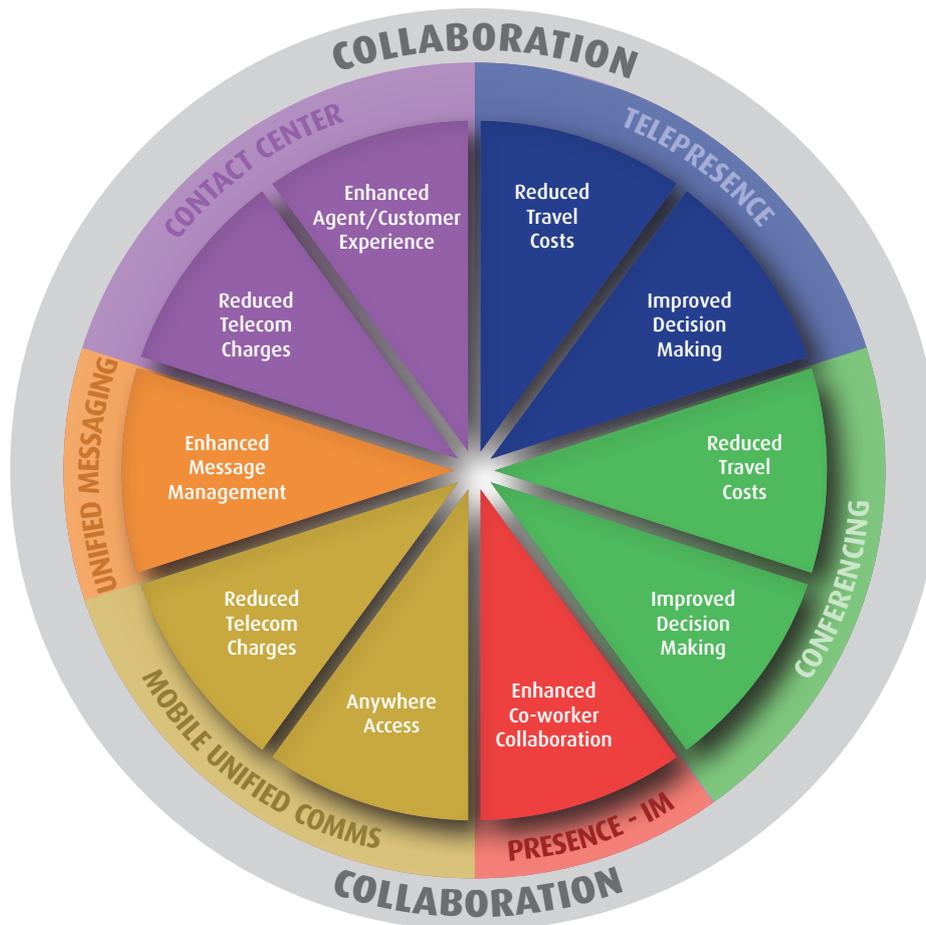
Enables telephone communication over an IP network rather than a traditional public switched network, helping to reduce operational costs and can be integrated with e-mail, calendaring, voicemail, instant messaging and conferencing. Many systems also include a capability that allows laptop or desktop PCs to launch and receive calls.

Further elements that can feature within a Unified Communications system include speech recognition servers; mobility and mobile access; collaboration tools such as white-boarding and document sharing; business process integration; and call control and multimodal communications.



# Benefits of Unified Communications

Streamlining the technology used within an organisation via Unified Communications has many benefits for the individual user, departments, the entire enterprise, customers and partners. These include:



- **Efficient communication.**

Rather than users turning to their desktop or mobile phone for voice communication, or to their PC for e-mail or instant messaging, everything can be achieved via one interface where the 'single identity' of individuals is stored and colleagues can be communicated with at the touch of a button. Users can then switch seamlessly between modes, meaning valuable time is no longer wasted and greater productivity can be achieved. Furthermore, as employees can be communicated with off-site without delay then important decisions can be made more quickly.

- **Message management.**

Unified Messaging allows the user to access messages – e-mail, voicemail, text message or fax – in whatever way is convenient to them through a single unified inbox. This could entail accessing email by phone, listening to voicemail through a PC, and having e-mail and text messages read out. Calendars can also be manipulated by cancelling meetings or informing attendees of a late arrival.

- **Access from anywhere.**

Data can be accessed from any location and from the user's device of choice. This means users can work where and when it is convenient, with the same efficiency and access to programs and information as in the office. As a result, companies have greater powers to recruit staff independent of their geographic location and can improve staff morale by giving them the freedom to work from home if required.



# Benefits of Unified Communications

- **Clever collaboration.**

Setting dates and venues for meetings can be a time-consuming task; however Unified Communications provides powerful time and resource management capabilities where the availability of staff can easily be obtained. The more spontaneous voice and video conferences are also achievable with both internal colleagues and external partners.

- **Reduced costs.**

Unified Communications can involve the utilisation of pre-existing technologies which can help to reduce infrastructure and installation costs. This also cuts down the number of systems that need managing (particularly as email and telephone can be seen as a single entity) and eliminates the need for a disruptive systems overhaul.

- **Easy admin management.**

IT professionals can easily manage users, servers and settings while monitoring the entire system, thanks to built-in single directory management. Management time and training costs are kept to a minimum as existing management tools can be utilised, leaving IT staff free to focus on areas that can help to develop the business.

- **Flexible solutions.**

Choose from a software-based communications platform on the company premises or a hosted platform. A range of options are available for e-mail management, security, remote communication and collaboration tools, which all adds up to simplified and cost-effective IT administration. Hosted services are particularly useful for smaller businesses as they are generally less expensive and easier to manage.

- **Complete protection.**

Secure communication is of paramount importance to businesses and built-in technologies can protect against viruses, spam and other malware via on-premise virus scanning of instant messaging and e-mail even before they reach the corporate network. Web conferencing can also be fully encrypted with numerous levels of security.

- **Handle compliance, governance and legal discovery.**

Address a boardroom and IT priority by meeting regulatory compliance and legal discovery needs. IT professionals have the ability to set communications policies and locate documents centrally without disrupting processes and productivity. Additional off-premise deployment of compliance support is also available.

- **Provision of high-availability.**

Technology is created to keep vital communication systems up-and-running in the event of a system failure or site disaster. This ensures business and e-mail continuity in a hosted environment to avoid any data loss.

- **Ready for the future.**

Unified Communications offer a software-based foundation, seamlessly integrating with existing infrastructure and able to adapt to future changes in technology and business need. Software reduces the need for expensive investment in hardware and solutions can integrate with the overall IT infrastructure. For example, software-based VoIP means that labour-intensive and costly phone installations are a thing of the past.

- **Going 'green.**

As Unified Communications can lead to a reduction in staff travel, minimising floor space due to fewer on-site workers and a reduction in systems and power requirements, companies can enhance their levels of sustainability.



# Business Continuity and Disaster Recovery

If an office is unavailable for reasons such as flood or fire, IP Voice Services can be reconfigured to automatically (if required) route incoming calls to other offices or mobiles with immediate effect, ensuring no loss of business and a continued service. Each Direct Dial Number can ring to a predetermined destination but can be altered at the click of a button. Unlike ISDN services which can take hours for the call diversion to be set up with your whole number range going to just one phone number - usually someone's mobile - IPVS will allow you to make a controlled Business Continuity plan to make sure your business doesn't miss a single call.



# Critical Capabilities of Unified Communications

A critical capability is a crucial enabler for a system to function correctly and is essential to the overall objective. Regarding the critical capabilities of Unified Communications, these are perceived to be:





# How Unified Communications fits into your level of business

Unified Communications can be implemented across any stage of a business's technological development. Here's how the Laggard, Industry Average and Best-in-Class levels of business can make steps to improve.

## Laggard Steps to Success

- **Document expected improvements from Unified Communications.** In order for measurable performance gains to be achieved, establish a baseline and devise policies and procedures to track levels of productivity over time.
- **Develop central IT management.** Take control of disjointed communications assets by establishing a policy for central IT management, and then enforce it.
- **Incorporate team-based collaborative tools.** Utilising social media, instant messaging, mobile wikis and micro-blogging can boost productivity as they make for an accelerated communications cycle.
- **Archive Unified Communications transactions.** All businesses must take heed of current directives regarding the archiving of digital communications. This applies to all types of communication from social media to e-mail and SMS, voicemail to video.

## Industry Average Steps to Success

- **Gain executive support.** Extol the virtues of Unified Communications to senior executives, with regard to productivity and operational efficiency, so that their support encompasses so much more than just budget approval.
- **Implement training for end users.** Train staff either internally or externally in order to streamline the business and communication and make sure they are getting the best use out of new technologies.
- **Monitor the reduction in travel costs.** Advanced capabilities such as group video conferencing, webinars, and online presence indicators, means travel expenses are drastically reduced – keep track of these savings so the benefits can be conveyed to key stakeholders.
- **Assess energy consumption.** Track the usage of devices and energy consumption, in addition to business travel, to document energy savings brought about by Unified Communications. Both the bottom-line and community relations can benefit.

## Best-in-Class Steps to Success

- **Focus on procedural controls.** At this level, archiving of Unified Communications transactions is not enough; moves must be made towards full procedural control and enforcement of Governance Risk and Compliance (GRC) regulations. This applies to companies of all kinds as many do not have such procedures in place.
- **Consider in-house support versus a managed services approach.** The majority of businesses at this level do not outsource to cost-saving third parties with domain expertise, so careful analysis can lead to an informed decision as to whether additional support would in fact be beneficial.
- **Standardised reporting within Unified Communications.** Processes such as progress reports and workflow templates can be standardised across the board to highlight and respond to lost efficiency and consistency.
- **Frequently assess the quality of support.** Aim to make continuous improvements by monitoring the status of the end-user experience, so that issues can quickly be addressed and market-share can be preserved.



# Use cases for Unified Communications

One particularly effective method of assessing how Unified Communications can be of benefit to a business is through 'use cases', i.e. how are communications used by individuals on a day-to-day basis and what do they find to be most/least useful? Most reviews such as this tend to highlight two distinct use cases:

- **Unified Communications for user productivity (UC-U).** This focuses on helping the user to better manage their communications, typically in the areas of instant messaging, click-to-communicate, presence statuses and efficient use/set-up of audio, video or web conferences.
- **Unified Communications for business processes (UC-B).** This focuses on improving business activities by identifying key areas within workflows or processes where problems arise, such as 'bottlenecks', which can affect the fulfilment of aims and objectives.

Common areas with room for improvement include: Contact management, ensuring that someone is on hand to help when the intended recipient is unavailable; Issue resolution, quickly locating a skilled worker who can provide information or respond to a query; Collaboration acceleration, providing the tools and space for teams to work effectively on projects; Remote communication, giving workers off-site the power to make use of on-site technologies, thus overcoming limitations; and Communications-enabled portals, providing secure access to people and information, for customers, suppliers and partners.

Businesses often focus on UC-U opportunities initially, as they are quick and easy to implement. UC-B is seen to carry greater benefits than UC-U though, and involves the identification of current processes that can be improved upon in order to streamline workflows and reduce errors and delays.

# Conclusion

It is clear that Unified Communications can provide many benefits to businesses of all shapes and sizes. These include lower IT staffing, expenses and running costs, an efficient and more productive workforce, faster decision-making and enhanced communication with colleagues, customers and partners. Flexible on-premise and off-premise solutions are also available to many workflow predicaments.

There are also great advantages to the individual users who are able to embed new functionality within their workflows. An overarching view is necessary though in order to determine what form and size of Unified Communications a business should implement. Taking time to scan overall business processes and liaising with executives to see where opportunities lie and barriers exist means priorities can be set and new technologies can be deployed.

By including everyone in the organisation, to some extent, innovative ideas can be proposed which will be of benefit to the working patterns of staff across the board. Evidence of this can be seen across a range of sectors and business sizes as the Unified Communications revolution really takes hold. Consider how Unified Communications can be of benefit to your organisation so you don't get left behind.



SynergyPlus are a business solutions provider with over 50 years combined experience specialising in Voice & Data, IT and Business Print Solutions. We believe in providing clients with tailored solutions, understanding what the business is trying to achieve, working closely with them to plan, implement and maintain their systems and provide personalised one-to-one support whenever they need it.

As part of our forward thinking approach, we are bringing more focus onto Unified Communications and the benefits it offers modern businesses. We produced this whitepaper as an introduction to UC for businesses and hope that it has given you the information you need to decide how to move forward.

**If you want to know talk to us about how UC may fit into your organisation,  
please contact SynergyPlus on 0800 915 6666.**

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