UNIFIED COMMUNICATIONS:
SEVEN WAYS TO DELIVER VALUE

Written by Nancee Ruzicka
OSS/BSS Global Competitive Strategies Stratecast
A Division of Frost & Sullivan

The promise of unified communications (UC) is simplification and real-time access to people, applications, data and collaborative support. In an "always-on" world where businesses are demanding more of employees and employees are trying to balance all of life's demands, UC delivers value by reducing costs and simplifying operations while giving employees the flexibility to connect and work from anywhere as though they were in the office.

Having an array of communication options at your disposal would seem to be convenient for staying connected with customers, colleagues and suppliers. In reality, though, the more communication methods available, the more likely it is that calls, messages and requests will be missed. Requiring that users synchronize multiple contacts, devices, applications and methods defeats productivity goals of availability, efficiency and cost containment. More time spent focusing on communication methods can mean less time spent focusing on customers. There are many ways that UC can deliver value to business, and we've identified seven of the most important:

CREATING CUSTOMER FOCUS
Whether it's a call, a text, an e-mail or an in-person meeting, there's no excuse for not being there for your customers. And once you've made contact, users need access to the right applications, data and support to ensure customer satisfaction.

KEEPING IT SIMPLE
Advanced communications are great unless employees don't use them because the interface is cumbersome, configuration is tricky or the service just plain doesn't work. UC provides remote management of services, devices, applications and data, which improves usability, maintains proper configurations and ensures that users are complying with corporate policies and standards.

MIXING MESSAGES
Unified messaging is currently the most desirable feature of UC. Voice, text, e-mail and chat messages are correlated to a single repository with a single sign-on and voice-to-text and text-to-voice translation. Employees are accessible wherever they are and messages don't get lost, saving time and preventing frustration.

TOGETHERNESS
Presence and chat features mean experts are available to join calls and solve problems in real time. Collaboration creates instant meetings where discussion is augmented with documents, drawings and chat for interactive exchanges without the burden of scheduling, rescheduling and travel.

GREEN GAINS
UC deployments enable a remote workforce. In addition to helping save the planet, businesses save money on office space, support and travel. The variety of conferencing techniques supported by UC eliminates the costs of dial-in conferencing by remote employees.

INCREASED PRODUCTIVITY
Less time spent checking messages, configuring multiple devices and synchronizing contacts makes employees more productive. UC-accessible business applications such as timekeeping and status reporting mean that employees spend less time focused on administration and more time focused on the bottom line.

STREAMLINED VISIBILITY AND CONTROL
Managing a UC deployment is easier than managing a hodgepodge of disparate networks and applications. With UC, network managers can readily monitor user devices and configurations, consistently implement updates, monitor application activation and usage, and control access to enterprise network and IT assets.

BOTTOM LINE

Sprint, the carrier of choice for enabling UC for hundreds of businesses, embarked on its own UC deployment beginning in 2007. Like many companies, Sprint is placing greater emphasis on improving efficiency and reducing costs by optimizing business processes and tools. Sprint implements a variety of communication methods for its employees both in and out of the office. Over time, customer and employee preferences for communication created a maze of infrastructure and processes that became increasingly difficult and expensive to maintain. After reviewing possibilities that included replacing most of the existing infrastructure and a time-consuming transition, Sprint decided on a simpler solution to enable mobility and collaboration for its workforce while reducing costs.

Sprint chose to implement a centralized UC capability that provides a single point of access for the variety of platforms, applications and devices already in use. Working with several technology partners, Sprint set out to implement its "work anywhere" philosophy. The Sprint UC deployment seamlessly integrates existing handsets, voice mail, fax and Internet with advanced features including e-mail and instant messaging. This combination delivers an integrated ecosystem of possibilities, including collaboration, conferencing and unified calendar functions, in a consistent manner to any of a variety of user devices, from desktop handsets and laptops to Sprint mobile devices.

Unified Communications automate many tools such as e-mail, voice mail, instant messaging, calendars, fax and audio and video conferencing into a common user experience.

Sprint is now collaborating with technology partners Cisco, IBM and Microsoft to enable UC for businesses and agencies. "Enabling unified communications is a cornerstone of Sprint's strategy to serve the rapidly evolving and increasing demands of the business and government market via our dependable Now Network," says Paget Alves, president of Business Markets Group, Sprint. "We are converging wireless and wireline technologies into an unprecedented user experience that is fully mobile, flexible, feature-rich, simplified and cost-efficient." By managing its own UC deployment, experiencing the pain points and overcoming implementation challenges firsthand, Sprint is in a unique position to take the lessons it has learned to customers as it guides them through the process.

Sprint's strategy reflects the company's ability to enable its partners' UC services with best-in-class convergence solutions:

» **Sprint Global MPLS** is a robust network that supports real-time applications and provides a unique foundation for enabling UC.

» **Sprint SIP Trunking** is a cost-effective solution that includes local and long-distance services.

» **Sprint Mobile Integration** is a unique solution that enables users to fully integrate their Sprint CDMA phones with the UC environment, extending desktop phone capabilities to mobile phones.

ADVANTAGES OF "WORK ANYWHERE"

Sprint's "work anywhere" philosophy, implementation of UC, training and end-user support are delivering real productivity gains and savings. By eliminating 489 PBXs, the 1,400 trunking circuits that connect them and the associated maintenance and support costs, Sprint expects to save $6 million per year in local carrier charges and an additional $2 million every 18 to 24 months by eliminating PBX upgrades and maintenance. It is also realizing additional savings from:

» Predictable costs
» Reduced travel
» One-number reachability
» Reduced pay-per-minute conferencing costs
» Shortened sales cycles
» Improved productivity
» Enhanced customer interactions and satisfaction
» Usage and performance visibility
» Improved privacy

Finally, reduced power consumption means an additional $1.25 million annually in greenhouse savings.

UC technology, access and applications are the means for Sprint to lower operating costs, create more satisfied customers and improve worker productivity. But the most important decision Sprint made was to implement policies that empower employees to work from almost anywhere.

In these challenging economic times, businesses are looking for ways to cut costs and realize the fastest possible return on investments. Sprint's efforts delivered tremendous savings in less than a year, and the experience it has gained will be invaluable to Sprint customers as they make their move to UC. ◼