Unified Communications & Collaboration:

Facilitating Teamwork in a Remote World

Leverage the power of the cloud to keep team members connected and engaged

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BUSINESS SOLUTIONS

Executive Summary

Businesses have been using Unified Communications (UC) for many years now to increase remote worker productivity and business efficiency through seamless, multi-channel communications. When implemented properly, UC offers significant savings and a fast ROI by integrating multiple messaging modalities—voice, video, text/chat, email, screen sharing, and presence—into a single application. Enterprises that have embraced UC have now come to rely on collaboration more than ever.

Unified Communications allows users to quickly and easily communicate with coworkers, colleagues, and customers in different departments, branch offices, or even countries without leaving their office—wherever that may be. Travel expenses for in-person meetings can be reduced even as collaboration and comradery among remote team members are enhanced. Real-time, integrated messaging speeds review, development, and approval cycles rather than coordinating business activities by piecing together disconnected phone calls, emails, and text messages.

This white paper examines why Unified Communications—and its cloud-based cousin, Unified Communications as a Service (UCaaS)—has become the solution of choice for remote work environments.

FOSTERING REMOTE TEAMWORK THROUGH UNIFIED COMMUNICATIONS

The initial planning meeting for the annual sales conference had been on the books for weeks. Everyone was in attendance, from the CMO and the Marketing team in New York, to the five VPs of sales from the East, South, Midwest, Central and West regions, to the marketing agency reps in Chicago, to the director of corporate events in Dallas. Friendly greetings were exchanged among coworkers who had not seen each other in some time. They shared a few laughs and vacation stories before they got down to business. Some had lunch during the meeting. The agency presented a rundown of the conference agenda and previewed a video supporting the president's opening presentation. They made revisions to schedules, reached decisions on next steps, and distributed copies of notes to everyone. They assigned action items and scheduled the next meeting. And when it was over...they simply pressed *end call* and went back to work.

This is the beauty of Unified Communications (UC) and a cloud-based version of the same capabilities, Unified Communications as a Service (UCaaS). Not one executive's time was spent on travel to or from the meeting. No one missed a subsequent call or appointment while being stuck in transit. The company did not spend money on airfare, hotels, meals, rental cars, and other on-the-road expenses. Yet everyone got their direction with crystal clarity. UC and UCaaS real-time audio/video communications with document/screen sharing and integrated messaging make it easy to partner with remote team members. Comprehension of complex topics is increased though visual demonstrations. Being able to pick up on non-verbal cues, such as body language, hand gestures, and facial expressions make it easier to tell when someone is uncomfortable with an idea or does not grasp a concept.

The Evolution of Unified Communications

Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) calling was the first real challenge to landline voice communications in business. Routing telecommunications though the internet eliminated long distance charges and reduced overall telco expenses. It enabled businesses to affordably access a number of advanced telephony services like multiple extensions with voicemail, call forwarding, call recording, voice to text translation, and automated directories with interactive voice response.

Unified Communications builds on the foundation of VoIP calling to integrate multiple communication methods within a business, including telephone calls, multi-point video conferencing, instant messaging, voicemail, email, and fax over the internet. UC consolidates all the ways employees, partners, and customers communicate into one application to make businesses much more efficient and reduce costs.[1] But early implementations of UC required businesses to purchase, maintain, and upgrade on-premises hardware including telephone sets, video displays, modems, and routers at every networked location. That was a tall order for large enterprises given the number of employees.

Now, these capabilities have migrated to the cloud. UCaaS is a cloud-based deployment method for delivering advanced communication services like text messaging, voice communications, and browser-based video conferencing as a single, coordinated service. It is being embraced by companies that do not have the budget, IT staff, or expertise to maintain a UC solution internally. Businesses lease the necessary services and hardware from a service provider for a low monthly payment. Some UCaaS solutions can be integrated with company contact lists and presence detection for fast and easy video call endpoint selection or audio call transferring. Others come with soft phones that enable users to use their PCs as a telephone, further reducing costs while eliminating the need for a chunk of hardware. UCaaS goes a step further to provide a variety of next-generation telecom services and remote collaboration tools, including mobile device support, presence technology, screen sharing with live document annotation, online chat, bots and virtual receptionists, webinars, SMS messaging, text-to-voice escalation, and call center capabilities for hundreds or thousands of users.[1] Remote workers can access these features or join a meeting using a personal device or an app from home; dedicated hardware is not required.

UCaaS enables businesses of all sizes to implement a select mix of communication services at minimal cost. It's flexible and scalable; businesses pay only for what they need and services can be quickly scaled up or down to match consumption. Adding features or more extensions for seasonal employees, for example, is accomplished at the flick of a software switch—there's no need to add more physical lines or equipment. And, it's future-proofed for the customer; the onus is on the service provider to maintain the latest upgrades, security features, and equipment.

Simplified remote collaboration is allowing businesses to experiment with new workflows, like a distributed workforce environment. Businesses quickly adapt to new paradigms, and employees can continue to be productive while the dog barks, the kids interrupt with homework questions, and the doorbell rings. UCaaS improves collaboration, keeps remote team members connected, and can even increase comradery by enabling relaxed, real-time visual communications, which interrupt the isolation of working from home or at remote branch offices. This is not news; the case for unified communications has been building for years. But we have now have arrived at a tipping point as indicated by the explosive growth in UCaaS deployment numbers.

TRENDS IN THE UC AND UCaaS SPACE

Most businesses completed the transition from ISDN and PSTN to VoIP telephony long ago. Many have already purchased separate applications to build their own UC experience, like video conferencing and instant messaging. But going that route can cost more per user, and individual components may lack integration with each other or contact lists and presence. Today, the focus is on shifting these services to the cloud with universal accessibility to and integration of all UC functions.

However, with UC/UCaaS technologies quickly maturing and most providers able to reliably deliver comparable services, today's decision makers are less worried about features and more concerned about reliability and support.

The primary drivers for UCaaS adoption continue to be cost and scale. IT buyers like the predictability of subscription-based cost models and being relieved of the responsibilities of equipping and maintaining the service. The ability to only pay for what they consume, the flexibility to freely scale services as needed with automated provisioning, support for growing mobile user populations, integrated security features, and disaster recovery capabilities are the primary motivations for businesses to move to UCaaS.[3]

Consider the following statistics:

- According to a 2019 study by Mordor Intelligence, the global UCaaS market is projected to reach a value of USD $1.712 billion by 2024, which equates to a CAGR of 25.67% for the upcoming four-year period. (Mordor Intelligence, 2019).[1]

- Nemertes' *Workplace Collaboration: 2019-20 Research Study* based on data gathered from more than 600 organizations operating in Western Europe, North America, Southeast Asia, and Australia shows that 19.1% of participants are now using UCaaS for their calling needs, while another 12.2% operate hybrid environments that contain a mix of UCaaS and on-premises or hosted options. For comparison, a year ago just 11.9% of participants used UCaaS, meaning that adoption has nearly doubled in the last year.

  Further, of the 35.7% of participants who still operate on-premises UC platforms, nearly half (43.2%) are evaluating or planning to adopt UCaaS in the next two years. Meanwhile, of the 17.8% using hosted platforms operated and managed by a third-party provider, almost two-thirds are considering or planning to shift to UCaaS. Taking all these data points together, it's clear that the UCaaS market is in the middle of a rapid growth phase.[3]

- A 2020 survey published by Dallas-based Masergy Communications, in partnership with IDG Research, found security and network services are the key challenges for enterprises deploying or considering UCaaS technologies. In fact, 70% of respondents said security is a top priority, and 93% want security features and network services bundled along with 24/7 performance monitoring. More than half want all their services from a single provider for simplified implementation and ongoing support.[4]

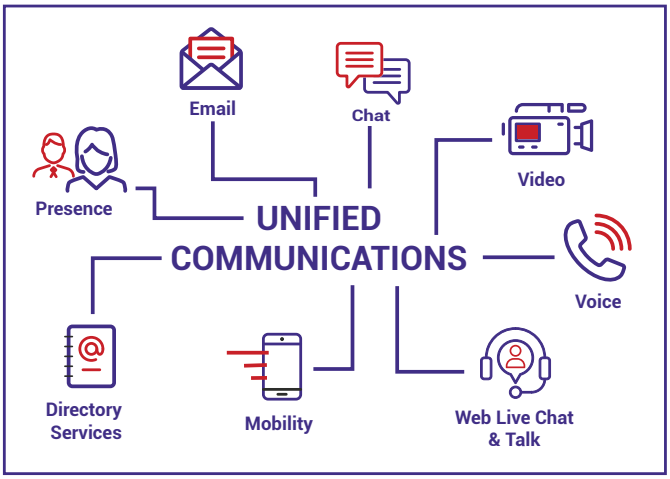
- Mobility in the workplace has become an increasingly important topic, with the number of remote workers having increased by 140% since 2005 (Global Workplace Analytics, 2019).[1]

Another trend involves the switch to SD-WAN as a backbone for UCaaS. Traditional WAN systems have an inefficient routing design that can result in excessive latency, packet loss, and jitter, which can cause pixilation, freezing, or dropouts on voice and video calls. SD-WAN saves money and improves performance, uptime, and reliability through enhanced visibility into network metrics and analytics to assure the quality of the Unified Communications service and the users' experience. Individually, SD-WAN and UCaaS provide clear communications, value and cost savings for businesses. Combined, those advantages are multiplied exponentially.[2]

The market momentum for UCaaS is clear. To be successful, UCaaS providers should focus on delivering simple to use, feature-rich offerings that enable easy automated provisioning and on-going feature management. The solution needs to be infinitely scalable and secure to ensure that information exchanged and conversations conducted through UCaaS channels are kept private.[3]

WHY UNIFIED COMMUNICATIONS? WHY NOW?

Maybe you're a loan officer at a bank, an actuary at an insurance firm, or the leader of a geographically disbursed vertical market sales unit or software coding team. Your responsibilities mean you must be able to quickly and easily ping, poke, or otherwise communicate with coworkers and colleagues in different departments, branch offices, or even countries. Unified Communications allows for seamless integration between multiple applications and even with third party software programs like CRM. Real-time, integrated messaging speeds review, development, and approval cycles rather than coordinating business activities by piecing together disconnected phone calls, emails, and text messages.



Today many businesses are considering initiating or expanding remote work environments thanks to a mix of technology advancements, changing needs of the organization, and employee work/life balance strategies. Here are six factors driving the adoption of Unified Communications, and specifically Unified Communications as a Service, as the preferred tool for all types of remote work environments:

1. **Simplified, team-based communication and collaboration.** UCaaS is critical to maintaining close connections with disbursed team members. A group video call to start the day or week keeps everyone engaged and allows for lively conversations and cross-talk among the entire team. You can announce or demonstrate something to everyone at once rather than having individual conversations. UCaaS facilitates group decision making and ensures everyone is working with the latest data. Features like remote whiteboarding, screen-sharing, document mark-up, and polling allow for more efficient collaboration on team-based projects. Calendar integration and presence technology give team members visibility into colleagues' availability to schedule meetings or to see if they are free to take calls. This reduces the incidences of missed messages and playing telephone tag.[3] Plus, the technology is not as complex or intimidating as before. Most users can set up a call or join a meeting with a few clicks.

2. **Changing workforce demographics.** Millennials and Gen Xers make up the majority of new hires today, and they have very different career expectations and work/life balance concerns than Baby Boomers. They are not afraid to work, but want more freedom in their choices of how, when, and where they work. Many prefer to work from home or on the road. UCaaS allows businesses to adapt to remote worker initiatives on their terms, providing both the enabling technologies to attract employees and control/monitor their communications.

It also removes physical barriers to talent acquisition; companies can hire the best candidates for the job no matter where they live. Further, consider that workforces are getting more specialized in the digital age. More projects are group-driven, with individuals assigned specific assembly line-like responsibilities. For example, the bank loan officer fills out the mortgage application and collects necessary documents from the applicant. The files are reviewed and organized by the processor, who coordinates with the appraisal department. The documents are then sent to underwriting, and then on to the closing department if the loan is approved. After that, it goes to the title company before ultimately landing back on the loan officer's desk for the customer to sign. Examples of similar workflows in healthcare, insurance, education, manufacturing, software development, and countless other industries increase the need for real-time collaboration among specialized employees. The combination of UCaaS and mobile connectivity provides the agility today's teams require.

3. **Support for mobility.** Being "out of the office" or "on the road" is no longer a viable reason to miss a call or meeting. With UCaaS, no one is ever out of reach. Voice communications or messages are deliverable wherever there is network connectivity. It does not matter where they are or what device(s) they are using; UCaaS is device agnostic. Some employees have more than one phone number and/or device. The one-number capability streamlines communications by pinging all of them simultaneously or sending messages in multiple formats (text/email/voice) as appropriate to reach a person. Moreover, UCaaS can eliminate the need for users to have separate personal and business smartphones, saving more money while maintaining an "always on" connection.

4. **Right-Size the Workplace.** UCaaS offers a cost-effective means to reduce office density for those organizations looking for the right balance of teleworkers and office-bound employees. Businesses looking to improve space utilization may be best served by considering alternative work strategies. Leveraging unified communication technologies to provide flexible work environments may be the most sustainable solution for satisfying growth without adding space.

5. **Maintain customer engagement.** UCaaS isn't just about improving internal team member communications. It's a great way to get customers and partners involved through real-time product demonstrations, training exercises, and interactive video presentations. Advanced features like SMS messaging provide totally secure two-way texting with customers for real-time feedback. Push notifications can quickly get the word out to thousands of customers about new products, recalls, or time-sensitive offers. Chat bots can engage website visitors automatically to answer basic questions without occupying an employee's time. For more intense customer engagement, many UCaaS platforms integrate with CRM software applications and allow call recording for compliance or training purposes.

6. **Better ROI and expense reduction.** Last but not least, UCaaS can save businesses money, increase employee productivity, and reduce overhead. By leasing the service, enterprises do not have to purchase and upgrade hardware or add dedicated IT staff to maintain a secure UC infrastructure. Expenses are predictable and services can be scaled up or down as necessary. Better internal/external communications boosts profitability. Jobs are finished faster, more deals are closed, and employees, customers, and partners are more engaged. Obviously, business travel and related lodging expenses can be slashed by eliminating unnecessary in-person meetings, and fluctuating, long distance PSTN and separate conference call charges will be things of the past. Although some research points to higher first-year costs due to initial set up expenses, UCaaS will positively impact a business' bottom line in Year 2 and beyond.[3]

TIPS FOR THE SUCCESSFUL ADOPTION OF UC/UCaaS

There are a variety of reasons to consider shifting to UCaaS for your business' communication and remote collaboration needs. But change can be hard. Introducing new technology without a change management strategy can create low user adoption, negating the return on investment that the introduction is intended to drive. Here are some recommendations for a successful implementation.[1,2,3,4,5]

- **Get input and feedback from future users on technology selection.** What good is it if no one uses it? Take the time to understand user requirements and frustrations. What problems does it need to solve? Poll your employees as to the features they would like to see in a UCaaS solution. Which ones are the must haves? Incorporating user feedback makes them feel valued and drives higher adoption.

- **Identify short-term and long-term communication goals.** UCaaS is an investment in the future. Make sure the solution you choose supports the capabilities you know you need today, as well as those you believe you'll need tomorrow. Can you add chat/text to voice elevation? Do you plan to switch to wireless headsets? Will it support call logging and recording for future training or compliance purposes as your enterprise grows?

- **Choose a single service provider whose solution is based on open standards.** Implementation and management is easier when dealing with a single provider; you'll usually get better visibility into usage metrics and experience fewer integration problems. Open standards allow customers to mix and match handsets, VoIP providers, and gateways to build a solution customized for their business. Proprietary systems lock customers into rigid hardware and software requirements and may not support integration with third party software.

- **Make sure the solution supports all operating systems.** Critical in *bring your own device* environments, all phone types and mobile network infrastructures should be fully supported without any interoperability issues. Select a software-based solution that can be easily integrated with your existing IT infrastructure and CRM applications.

- **Standard or optional?** Check which UC features are included as standard with the solution. Some vendors, for example, charge extra for features like presence technology or call recording. Make sure the solution includes fully integrated, multiple-participant video conferencing to boost collaboration within your business.

- **Plan for change.** Run a pilot program among a select group of users before deploying the system company-wide. Work out the bugs and be prepared to incorporate changes after seeing the system in limited action. Revisit goals periodically to see if performance objectives are being met. Is it time to scale up or add a new feature to keep pace with business growth? Expand your definition of disaster recovery/ business continuity planning to include things like pandemics in addition to physical disasters. UCaaS can keep lines of communication open during periods when the office is inaccessible for any reason. Finally, create a feedback mechanism to allow end-users to make recommendations for improvements as they become more proficient with the system.

- **Don't go it alone.** Get professional help from an experienced UC services provider. As the saying goes, *you don't know what you don't know*. UCaaS providers know the right questions to ask when performing a needs analysis to design and deploy a platform that integrates with your IT infrastructure. They'll be able to recommend and implement technologies like SD-WAN for centralized control over messaging traffic patterns, enhanced network resilience, and 24/7 security monitoring and threat detection—things that might be above the pay grade of some in-house IT departments. (If you would like more information on SD-WAN technology, download our white paper, *The Software-Defined WAN: A Technology Whose Time Has Come*). Most providers offer these and other consulting services at little or no cost when onboarding new clients. Why wouldn't you want their expertise behind your UCaaS deployment?

UCaaS Positions Your Business for the Future

There are many reasons to adopt UC/UCaaS technology, from changing workforce demographics to mobility and cost reduction. The "always on" nature of our jobs and the increase in group-driven workflows (like our mortgage example) require new tools to facilitate teamwork. Businesses of all sizes implementing UCaaS will realize improvements in remote collaboration, employee productivity, and customer satisfaction while enjoying lower a cost of communications and reduced meeting and travel expenses. Are you ready to take your business communications to the next level? Talk to us. RCN Business, Grande Communications Business and Wave Business has the expertise to make UCaaS a reality for your enterprise. It's time to move your communications to the cloud.

SOURCES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Information, technology statements and statistics for this paper have been sourced from the following articles:

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