

Simon Paton. UK MD of CommuniGate, explains his views on the reality of Unified Communications

If ever there was a technology that the user didn't know they needed, then Unified Communications is it. Even as little as five years ago, if you asked the average office worker how vital it was to know whether an email recipient was sitting waiting to receive their message, or whether having voicemail messages coming into their email Inbox would be an advantage, most would probably have said "well, it sounds OK, but it's not the end of the world if I can't".

Yet as with all new technologies, once we start experiencing the benefits it's suddenly hard to go backwards. The ability to receive all message formats via one office-based or remote device, or to be contactable via a single 'address' for email, IM and voice has suddenly become a reality. Companies are realising that staff expect the same range of communications devices in the office as they have at home. Take the average twenty-something entrepreneurial sales rep. He has Skype at home and Windows Messenger, which he uses regularly to communicate with friends and family around the world. Yet his employer cannot offer the same flexible options for business communications, so he ends up using these consumer-facing applications, even though their functionality is limited and they are totally non-secure. The business world needs to catch up, and overtake, fast. It is starting to happen but I think it's fair to say that true Unified Communication still has a long way to go.

Every company has a phone system and an email server, then a separate database server, possibly an IVR server – and very probably some form of proprietary Instant Messaging (IM) system which the IT manager tolerates in the absence of anything better. The challenge for these IT Managers is to 'unify' all of those disparate systems and make them function as one single communications solution. But the reality is that no company is likely to replace their telecoms system and their email system at the same time. So from a reseller's point of view, the opportunity comes from identifying an initial requirement, selling solutions which will meet that need, but then retaining the option to sell additional elements of the 'unified solution' in the future.

Take a recent customer example, a university that needed a new email server. We got involved in the sale and quickly identified a much larger opportunity. Once we started talking about a Unified Communications solution involving VoIP and secure commercial-grade IM as well as email our client immediately saw a huge potential benefit for staff and students. But the reality is that telecoms or converged resellers are more likely to get involved in a sale from the voice side of things first. So by proposing a Unified Communications approach there's an opportunity to expand the sale beyond voice into IM, email and mobile data solutions, which in turn opens up access to a larger percentage of the IT budget.

Having identified what a great business opportunity Unified Communications represents, resellers need to decide which vendors they will work with to combine all of the elements required. It quickly becomes apparent however that there are numerous options available, all of which will do part of the overall solution, but which need careful and complex integration in the background to make them work effectively for the user. And given that the user just wants to see a single integrated interface and quite frankly doesn't really care what goes on in the background, it's the IT Manager who faces the real challenge behind the scenes.

What resellers need is a solution that is as integrated in the background as it appears to be at the desktop. A true single-platform Unified Communications system that runs on a single server and requires no complex integration or multi-vendor interaction. This is where CommuniGate Pro comes in. It's a fully featured solution that provides VoIP, email, calendar management, groupware, IM, presence management and mobile access, sold as a single platform but in separate suites which can be activated as the business requires. And because it runs on a single

server, it also helps companies to meet their environmental goals by minimising the use of electricity and air conditioning, and so reducing their overall carbon footprint. Resellers are looking for a true Unified Communications solution which is easy to sell, simple to implement, and delivers both short and long term financial benefits. So when existing customers tell you *“it’s everything we expected and more - lots more”* or *“there is so much it can do and we know that we’ve hardly scratched the surface”* or *“it really did provide everything that we needed and we were amazed that it was able to do so in a single platform”* you know you’re on the right track.

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