Unified Communications and your business
The myths, market drivers and what you need to know

Executive summary
To create a consistent, seamless Unified Communications (UC) experience across your organization, you must first examine your existing infrastructure and business processes to determine what components will work best for your business. What processes are you trying to streamline or simplify? How can UC make your business run more smoothly and your workers be more productive? Do you have the right infrastructure in place to accommodate the applications and services that will benefit your business the most? This paper provides an overview of the potential benefits of UC and discusses some key considerations you should keep in mind when mapping out your UC strategy.

Unified Communications
What is it? You may think of a laundry list of applications and capabilities related to your business—technologies like IP telephony, presence, messaging, email and video conferencing, to name a few, but it is more than that. Unified Communications is an ecosystem consisting of multiple components of business capabilities, and the result is communication delivered in real-time, based on how you want it, where you want it and when you need it.

The promise of Unified Communications is powerful, but implementing Unified Communications across your enterprise requires tremendous flexibility and a lot of forethought. For example, you may need to accommodate a range of hardware and a wide variety of applications and services. While some services can be provided on-premise, particularly in larger companies where IT resources are plentiful, others need to be hosted off site. Many smaller companies that lack IT resources rely solely on Software as a Service (SaaS) providers to deliver the communications services they require. In short, what works best for one business may not work best for yours. It is critical to first examine your existing infrastructure and business processes to determine what components will work best for your business before you execute your UC implementation.

One-stop communications dashboard delivers consistency and convenience
Deploying Unified Communications sets the stage for businesses to improve processes, increase collaboration, raise productivity and simplify communications. The concept of UC is gaining wide acceptance. Key drivers include the need to minimize the communications latency and the need to maximize effectiveness and efficiencies in everyday business transactions. Users want a consistent look and feel across their communications software—whether they’re emailing, instant messaging or looking up contact information for a co-worker or colleague.

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Today when a worker wants to communicate with a co-worker, he must either send an email and wait for a response, or place a phone call and hope the other person answers. If the co-worker is unavailable by phone, the caller must leave a message and wait for a return call. This process is slow, inefficient and can cause long delays in response times. Critical projects or issues are often put on hold as workers fail to communicate in a timely fashion.

With Unified Communications, workers can access all of their communications applications through a single communications dashboard. For example, a worker may open an email in Outlook, click on the email and check presence information on the spot. With UC, he will be able to see whether the other worker is available by phone. He can instantly open a chat session and request a meeting, or click to dial an IP connection. If the worker is unavailable, information about his whereabouts is displayed. UC has the ability to connect people rapidly using better, timelier information, and it facilitates better response times, faster decision making and enhanced collaboration.

**Smother workflow offers productivity gains**

UC isn’t tied only to your email environment; it actually unifies multiple environments—email, IM, phone, video conferencing, document review and more—into a single, easy to use environment. For example, you can review a document containing a co-worker’s name, highlight that name and open a live chat session while you’re editing. Or, if you’re working in a spreadsheet, UC lets you send an IM to verify numbers or facts. UC makes the workflow more fluid, eliminates stops and starts and can dramatically increase individual productivity.

Let’s look at a real-world scenario. An investment adviser is discussing options for mutual funds over the phone with a potential client. The potential client asks a question that the adviser cannot answer. Without UC, he would have to either put the customer on hold or call him back at a later time with the information. With UC, the adviser can look at the dashboard on his PC and contact an expert by email, IM or phone. He can even conference the expert in with the client to address the question in real-time. The ability to address the client’s concerns immediately can have a big impact on the adviser’s ability to close the deal.

The increasingly global nature of today’s business environment makes UC even more essential. There is a critical need for better collaboration business units and a diverse workforce that includes remote workers, partners, vendors, suppliers and consultants. Statistics repeatedly show that the majority of workers aren’t at headquarters. Employees are spread out but need to stay in touch with team members and collaborate efficiently to reduce the cycle time on business processes.

**Debunking the myths about Unified Communications**

So what could get in the way of the adoption of the UC model? Mostly misconceptions. As with any new approach to doing business, people are hesitant. Here are a few of the most common myths associated with UC:

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<th>Myth #1</th>
<th>Reality #1</th>
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<td>UC communications only work on IP networks.</td>
<td>Although the optimal way to deploy UC is on an IP network, UC can also be used with legacy TDM networks. A company can begin to integrate UC technologies with its TDM network and enjoy immediate benefits as they begin their migration to IP, which ultimately will offer cost and management advantages that make its adoption worthwhile.</td>
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Myth #2  
UC is fully plug-and-play, so you must go with a single vendor.

Reality #2  
While economies of scale and smooth integration results make having a single supplier for all your UC components desirable, it is not necessary. You may choose instead to take best-in-class components from various suppliers, as long as they’re interoperable. However, if you choose a complete solution from a single vendor, you can benefit from a more plug-and-play approach and eliminate integration issues altogether.

Myth #3  
UC is a software OR hardware-based solution. You can’t have a mixture of both.

Reality #3  
In terms of adopting a software or hardware-based solution, the two are not mutually exclusive. No two customers have the same requirements, so communications hardware vendors are beginning to form strong partnerships with software vendors to provide more complete, flexible UC solutions.

Myth #4  
UC only benefits businesses of a certain size.

Reality #4  
All businesses can reap the benefits of Unified Communications. UC vendors like CenturyLink offer both on-premise and SaaS solutions to accommodate IT departments of all sizes. Companies can host all UC services on-premise, have a combination of on and off-premise components or outsource the entire solution to a SaaS provider. UC components can also be deployed, first with a small group within an organization, and then expanded to encompass other groups to meet changing business requirements.

Unified Communications architecture

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What you need to know

To implement a successful UC strategy in your organization, you’ll need to do the following:

- **Plan well**
  Spend the time and effort ahead of time to map out your deployment.

- **Understand your business requirements**
  Remember that UC is communications delivered in real-time based on preference; understand your business processes and the requirements of your workforce before making any decisions about what components of UC would work best for your business. Voice over IP is a logical place to start, and from there you can begin to layer on other applications like video conferencing and contact center solutions.

- **Know your priorities**
  A full deployment can take multiple phases to complete, so know your priorities before you start.

- **Identify necessary resources**
  Be sure to have the right resources and the people with the right expertise and skills ready to execute your UC rollout. Remember that deploying your successful UC strategy is a journey. By improving worker collaboration and enhancing decision making through more immediate communications, UC can give your company a powerful competitive advantage. When executed with forethought and planning, UC provides your business with the opportunity to integrate communication with business processes, leading to more streamlined, efficient business operations.

Why CenturyLink?

CenturyLink delivers reliable, scalable data and voice networking solutions, across one of the largest U.S. fiber footprints. CenturyLink serves businesses of all sizes, ranging from small business to 95% of Fortune 500 companies, with industry-leading SLAs and world-class customer service.

CenturyLink is focused on helping you work smarter, with services that leverage the latest technology and award-winning support.

Other CenturyLink products

In addition to Unified Communications, we also offer these products:

- Unify
- Managed IP Communications
- Managed VoIP

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