

SMB adoption of Unified Communications comes of age

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Unified Communications for the smaller business has been likened to the proverbial teenage sex— everyone talking about but no one actually doing it.

But 2008 looks like the year this sector will come of UC age.

What exactly is Unified Communications?

At its core, Unified Communications (UC) is having one single IP network for all data, telephony and video.

However, whilst built on industry standards, UC is not one single product or defined feature set. It is the extension of telephony to include integrated applications or capabilities which make communication easier and more effective.

The advantage is that these environments are now all talking the same language (IP) so just as a group of native English speakers don't need translation services, neither do UC voice, data and video systems.

This makes it much easier to do a whole range of things from screen popping information from a CRM (Customer Relationship Management) system based on the caller ID (CLI), displaying voicemails, emails and faxes in a single inbox via Unified Messaging through to more advanced applications like collaboration tools which allow users on PCs to share documents, speak and see each other over video in real-time via a single application. It also extends capabilities to field workers so they can access corporate systems wherever they are.

What's in it for us?

The paradox of UC is that the benefits for smaller companies are possibly greater than those for bigger companies and yet adoption has been the other way round.

Small businesses tend to share some common challenges - how to:

- Compete and grow in the global 'clicks and mortar' world?
- Retain and grow their customer base?
- Get more out of the limited resources they have?

UC delivers the technologies which directly support companies to rethink and enhance their business processes and find new forms of competitive advantage.

One company enjoying these benefits is S4Financial plc (www.s4plc.co.uk), tax planners and portfolio managers based in Surrey. Business Development Director, Steven Vallery, describes their journey 'When we started the company in 2003 we needed telephone and IT systems that would be strong and reliable, that would grow with us but not be too expensive. We needed to give the right impression to our high net worth clients'.

S4Financial launched with just 4 directors yet went straight for an IP based solution, a decision Vallery is confident was right. 'It is far far easier. As we've grown we've just added new people quickly and easily. It's a testament to the system that people just use it without having to ask. We don't waste time'.

'We use an auto attendant capability with hunt groups which gets calls direct to the right person. We can deal with them quickly and professionally. This might sound very minor but it's a significant benefit because it makes us so much more efficient and allows our staff to get on with what they are meant to be doing! It also allows our people to work wherever they are'.



Graham Bromham, Sales Director at Solsis (www.solsis.co.uk), a Reading-based SMB ICT specialist, concurs. 'Our own adoption of UC came on the back of a new CRM system. We needed greater flexibility than our old system could deliver. Our new system gives us this. We can now handle our sales and support calls differently. We have different 'time of day' behaviours for calls to our help desk and we can change them when we want to. We recently changed some team structures and simply routed calls so they would automatically go to the right person. On top of this, reporting and integration with Outlook and CRM are pretty powerful tools for an SMB'.

Solsis are about to move offices and Bromham is confident of an easy move and the opportunity to develop the system further. 'Expanding is easy. It's a platform to build on. We're starting to look at additional benefits we can get. First will probably be call recording for our help desk which will give us a number of advantages'.

Implementing UC – what to consider

Companies are starting to see the benefits of UC and adoption of IP telephony at least is increasing. However, the perception of price is still a challenging factor for most SMBs. Bromham offers a word of caution: "Hybrid" systems [which combine traditional with IP telephony] often appear cheaper and seem to do the same thing. The reality is that in terms of basic telephony they probably do but the wise move is full IP because that's where the real benefits are to be found'.

To address SMB concerns about price and complexity, several manufacturers have launched dedicated SMB 'all-in-one' solutions which cut complexity and price without compromising important functionality. Options also exist to help small businesses spread the cost of these technologies from highly competitive leasing options to a growing number of hosted offerings.

Peter Howells, MD of UC specialist 5i (www.5i.co.uk), agrees 'SMBs are looking for a clear, simple package which delivers the features and benefits they need without overcomplicating things. That's been a challenge for the channel but one that's being addressed now'.

For those embarking on the journey, Bromham advises that 'Planning is critical. The most challenging thing is to really think about what the business wants now and possibly in the future. It's very easy to look at the market and see lots of features but what do you really want? Look at what is going to be beneficial to you and your customers'.

Vallery of S4Financial agrees 'We definitely didn't have a bad experience but in hindsight I would have liked to know more about how it all fits together. Allowing enough time to prepare properly is very important'.

Ongoing support is also worthy of careful consideration. As Vallery explains 'Our system has been very reliable but IT is not our core business so it makes business and financial sense to outsource all the support to a specialist. It was a very simple decision. My advice is that if you don't have your own staff, outsource it'.

The platform for the future

The benefits are clear: UC provides greater flexibility and opportunities to improve processes and customer communication. It's a journey many will embark on in 2008. It needs some thought and careful planning but as Bromham says 'I couldn't consider living without it – it does too much for us'.



Top tips

1. Plan! Look at the business. What would help you meet your business goals?
2. Plan! Choose a partner who can help you to make the right decisions about how your new system will work, for instance, how should different types of calls to be handled?
3. Weigh up price against the broader benefits you will get – it's not just a replacement phone system. Spread the cost via leasing or hosted solutions if necessary
4. Consider what support you want: outsourcing may be cost effective
5. And when you can't plan anymore? Don't worry – you can add capability when it's right

Jargon explained

- **VoIP** (Voice over Internet Protocol): generic term for telephony transported over IP. Often refers to
 - **Internet telephony** e.g. Skype, using a headset and software on a PC
 - Hosted telephony services using IP to transport calls
 - Gateway cards in a PBX to route inter-site calls free over the IP-based WAN (Wide Area Network)
- **IP telephony** (IPT): the PBX and telephones are connected directly onto the IP (data) network. This increases functionality and flexibility.
- **Unified Communications** (UC): Integration of applications into IPT environment to enhance productivity e.g. billing, call recording, intelligent call management and routing, user presence and availability, mobile worker and homeworker communications, contact centres, conferencing and collaboration tools and integration with specific industry software.

Caution: terms are often used interchangeably so check intended meaning!