

Small & Midsize Businesses Answer the Call to Unified Communications

TECHNOLOGY DELIVERS EFFICIENCIES, BOOSTS PRODUCTIVITY,
CUTS COSTS & IMPROVES CUSTOMER SERVICE

Introduction

IT professionals can equip their small and midsize businesses with an affordable yet powerful weapon in the ongoing battle against the onslaughts of extensive games of voicemail-tag, lengthy scheduling discussions and high-priced long-distance telephone bills.

Unified communications (UC) solutions, once the exclusive domain of enterprise organizations, now include affordable and manageable technologies that deliver efficiency and cost-savings to smaller businesses. The technology is, in fact, so valuable to SMBs that UC is one of the 10 IT trends that CIOs at midsize organizations should have on their radar, David Cappuccio, managing vice president of Gartner, told attendees of the Midsize Enterprise Summit in May 2009, according to CRN.

By 2013, the UC product market alone is expected to generate \$16.4 billion compared with \$15.4 billion in 2008 and about \$14 billion in 2007, according to a November 2008 report by Wainhouse Research. UC integrates voice, data and video, and should include presence, instant messaging and rich media conferencing.

Within SMB contact centers alone, 20 percent of SMBs currently use UC and 55 percent were evaluating these solutions, according to a summer 2008 report by the Aberdeen Group. That penetration is expected to sky-rocket: UC will be “the wave of the future,” according to Research and Markets, which compared adoption of this technology to that of email, now a vital lifeblood to businesses of all sizes.

by
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Costly Pain Points

Colossal enterprises often admire and envy SMBs' agility, their ability to quickly shift direction based on market needs or customer requests. But each week SMBs spend almost 18 hours waiting for information; dealing with unwanted communications; grappling with inefficient coordination and overcoming obstacles to collaboration; and handling customer complaints, according to a February 2009 study by SIS International Research for Siemens Enterprise Communications.

In fact, 70 percent of SMBs claimed to experience these five pain-points, the report says. Companies with 100 or more employees could lose more than half a million dollars a year by failing to address employees' most onerous communications woes, according to SIS. In addition to employee headaches and damaged customer relations, lost productivity cost SMBs about \$26,000 per knowledge worker a year or about \$5,200 per employee, according to *ChannelWeb*.

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Defining UC

The return on UC's investment should, then, be easily determined, especially if you partner with executives hardest-hit by communications breakdowns: Sales and customer service immediately come to mind.

Presence, or the ability to see someone's availability and preferred means of communication, is a valuable component of UC. Presence enables you to see the best way to reach someone, whether it's by instant message (IM), cell phone, email or office line. Just as you might walk past someone's desk to see if they are available, a presence indicator shows each employee's status and ways to reach him or her. It resembles the familiar IM status boxes, which show network members to be busy, on the phone or away from their desk. Multiple Points of Presence (MPOP) automatically indicate an employee's availability: If someone was shown to be away from the office, all messages - phone and email - automatically would go to their cell phone, for example.

This visibility into everyone's availability dramatically improves productivity: No longer is anyone waiting for Bob to reply when he's on emergency family leave. It also facilitates information exchanges among colleagues; seeing Sue is still in the office, Joe can send her a quick message about the status of a client report he is working on.

Available as an on-premise solution, UC is also offered as a hosting service, reducing SMBs' up-front costs, and eliminating the need for additional IT professionals, maintenance contracts, network capabilities and hardware, or future upgrade plans. On-premise often means products by multiple vendors, resulting in compatibility concerns and headaches, more partnerships to manage and a drain on training and maintenance resources. On the other hand, hosted UC implementations are managed end-to-end as a full-service solution.

The Intermedia Advantage

Simple to use, UC's back-end complexities mandate a partner with extensive and proven experience in providing UC to clients. Intermedia, for example, delivers hosting services for hosted email, mobility, instant messaging, fax, collaboration tools and unified communications. Intermedia clients dramatically save money on the high costs of implementation, maintenance and support. Intermedia's hosted UC - developed by UC software company Unison - is designed specifically for SMBs, and includes Voice over IP (VOIP) telephone service, email, presence, instant messaging and more in one easily administered application.

Combining these features reduces costs and improves productivity, without the costs and complexities associated with enterprises' complex, multi-vendor, on-premise systems. Intermedia delivers Unison solutions at an affordable price, yet does not skimp on service or support. Since it's a complete solution, you don't have to worry about integrating multiple vendors' products and the costly, time-consuming and sometimes unproven deployment of hybrid systems.

Opening Doors

As the number of communications devices on-hand increases, the frustrations associated with reaching a live person will only grow. After all, 88 percent of executives surveyed by Ascendent Systems have three or more phone numbers, a study shows. Not surprisingly then, 43 percent of those polled spend one to three hours a week checking voicemail and playing phone tag, the report states. A Cisco study puts that figure even higher, estimating executives spend up to two hours a day leaving, listening and responding to voicemails. Small or large, most organizations no longer have enough support staff to filter messages, adding more responsibilities to executives' already laden shoulders.

Inefficiencies are the primary reason internal business decisions are delayed, according to Forrester Research. Each voicemail takes time to replay. Issues remain unresolved as increasingly frenzied employees reach out for vital information. And customers get impatient, awaiting the information they need to make their next move. Frustrated by a slow response, clients may move on to a more accessible and responsive competitor.

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Business Boost

Equipping employees with the latest, proven technologies to further open the lines of communication not only saves money and boosts productivity, it also delivers a message about the value you place on your customers, a message that will not get lost in voicemail tag.

About the Author

Formerly the Managing Editor, Departments, of Computer Reseller News, Alison Diana has spent more than 20 years covering the hottest trends in the tech world. She's written thousands of articles, many of which have been featured in leading tech publications such as Baseline Magazine, eWeek, IT Expert Voice and CRN. Currently a freelance reporter and tech-savant, she now most closely follows Hosted Exchange and SaaS trends and enjoys cheering on her daughter's Little League baseball team in her free time. Alison welcomes the thoughts and opinions of her readers. You can reach her here via email at alisondiana@hotmail.com.

This 'Small and Midsize Businesses Answer the Call to Unified Communications' whitepaper was co-sponsored by Spiceworks and Intermedia — partners in helping SMB IT pros simplify "everything IT" about their jobs.



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