## The Future of Unified Communications

By Gary Gluzman

In the communications industry, "Unified Communications" (UC) has become a ubiquitous term. But what does that mean exactly? At the moment, UC is defined as the convergence of multiple communications platforms, facilitating real-time communication in a digital space. This industry buzzword is ringing through the enterprise and is resonating with the consumer base. Millennials are pushing the industry into the cloud, where a text is no longer the most efficient way to reach a friend. From a consumer standpoint, we've come full circle in our preferred method of communication. In an almost nostalgic move, UC solutions allow users to return to a time of personalized communication, except instead of face-to-face, it's video-to-video.

UC technology up-levels communication, marching our digital conversations closer to real-time exchanges. The average consumer or employee is now inundated with messages—SMS texts, endless email chains, paper mail, the list goes on. But what does this mean on an enterprise level? How can employers facilitate seamless and efficient communication? That question lies in the hand of UC developers. As the industry free-falls into an age of evolving UC platforms, CIOs are wondering—who will lead the charge towards UC technology in the workplace?

### The Fight for UC Domination

At this point, the unified communications industry is divided into three camps: wireless carriers, existing software providers and emerging software platforms. In their corner, the wireless carriers have reign over network technology, existing software providers have widespread credibility and emerging platforms have an expanding user base. Who will come out on top of this brawl? Here's a closer look at the three contenders:

### Wireless Carriers

Unified communications is not a natural fit for today's major wireless carriers. While texting was once the trendy way to communicate, many carriers are seeing most of their SMS revenue leaving in favor of popular consumer-facing applications such as iMessage, WhatsApp, Viber, Skype, etc. To combat the rising competition, carriers are turning towards heavy investments in Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) platforms such as AT&T's Toggle, as well as existing software providers' UC platforms, so as not to be left behind. These services ultimately enhance consumer and business users' experience, which fuels bandwidth consumption.

Additionally, if these services are purchased through the carrier, people are less likely to switch to a competing solution. Despite having the network technology in place to connect users, wireless carriers are forced to leverage outside software provider technology to keep up with the growing UC demands SMS once filled. In this way, wireless carriers have the platforms in place to facilitate UC expansion, but they are not able to drive growth through their existing product base.

### Existing Software Providers

We're also seeing office software giants expanding into the world of UC. For consumers, these platforms include Facebook's Messenger app, Google's Gchat, Skype, etc.  For the enterprise user, an entire market has emerged around employee communication. We're seeing UC solutions in the form of Microsoft's Skype for Business, or Cisco's Jabber. These products leverage key
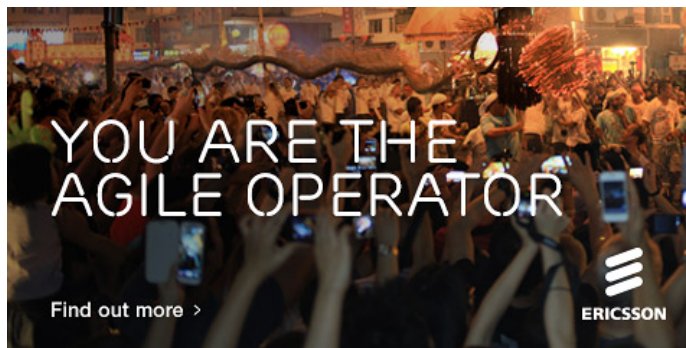
services, including presence, desktop sharing and video conferencing capabilities. In this way, these platforms are dominating the UC conversation for enterprise users by integrating within existing office software and facilitating real-time conversations. These existing companies are also able to leverage their massive user base and name recognition to drive engagement.

In terms of longevity, it is still unclear which services will actually last. For example, Facebook Messenger is hugely popular with consumers, but it does not fit in a work environment and cannot compete with Skype for Business in the workplace. Only time will tell which platforms are here to stay, but it is clear that there will always be consumer and enterprise UC platforms.  Consumer social networking platforms are gaining ground, and is already the standard form of communication. In the enterprise space, Skype for Business seems to be leading the race. However, federation platforms such as NextPlane's, as well as AT&T, enable interconnecting with other UC platforms such as Cisco Jabber, IBM Sametime, Broadsoft UC On, etc. and even several consumer UC platforms.  Federation extends UC outside of a company and streamlines real-time communications with vendors and partners, which are typically still handled via email or telephone.

### Emerging Software Platforms

The dark horse in the UC race, emerging software platforms, are the new companies that are springing up with a sole focus on providing a new UC experience. These include products such as Slack or Glip, which introduce collaboration solutions alongside built-in productivity tools. These services are generally adopted by development teams, due to their collaborating functionality. Emerging platforms are built to facilitate group work, filing sharing, task assignments, getting the attention of a group member and schedule coordination all in a single environment.  There is also integration with other third party applications (for example, services that report system errors or successes) thus making such portals a single place of communication.

For start-ups and SMBs, emerging software solutions are often the choice du jour. However, they don't easily scale to enterprise-grade deployments and are even, at times, deployed alongside Skype for Business. The new software

platforms on the scene have sprung up as a response to the growing UC trend and unique needs within developer and start-up environments, but they remain a niche solution in a sprawling communications market.

## What's Next?

It has become increasingly clear that business users are going to gravitate towards a solution that is cloud-based, provides a seamless transition between devices (smart phone, tablet, PC, Mac, etc.) and displays presence with integrated email and desk phones. Consumer UC services will always be utilized by some users in a business environment, but ultimately they don't translate cleanly into a workplace setting. Consumer-facing services aren't able to integrate with email or Active Directory, which are essential features for corporate efficiency.

To give you a visual, when you receive an email within an integrated UC platform, you can see if the person is currently sitting at their desk based on their chat status. If you know they're sitting at their desk, you're more inclined to shoot a quick question over via UC chat. Or, if you see they're in a meeting, you might chose to respond to the email chain instead. Knowing where UC is headed, we'll most likely see a rise in video and desk phone chat integration as well—eliminating unnecessary email-chains and pushing internal communication towards real-time responsiveness.

All of these trends point towards existing software platforms sweeping the future of UC with their integrated messaging solutions. However, no matter how your business chooses to approach UC, it's important to

get on board. Remember what email did for internal communication? This is the new frontier. As we've seen through the Internet of Things, we are entering an age of connectivity. People expect instantaneous results, rapid responses and constant availability. Email no longer provides the immediacy a chat or video response can provide. Some executives claim that UC has fully replaced their email. That might not be the case for all users, but it may be where the workplace is headed.

By introducing presence into the mix—UC connects employees across locations, or even from across the hall. Knowing if your colleague is on the phone, in a meeting, out of the office, or simply away from their desk is becoming the norm, facilitating the most efficient real-time dialogue among employees instead of generating lengthy email threads. Additionally, graduating chat conversation into a voice or video call with desktop sharing capabilities will enhance productivity and connect our increasingly globalized workforce. The age of UC is here—there's no denying it. And it's clear that no matter where it's headed, internal communication, office productivity and workplace expansion will never be the same.

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