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Pushing "Real Time" Productivity through Unified Communications

For the past decade, Unified Messaging has been evolving. It has advanced from merely funneling messages to your email inbox into a complete productivity catalyst. It's a technology that has finally matured into a real business driver, even for small to medium enterprises.

This new evolution, known as Unified Communications, comes at a time when companies are developing a more mobile workforce. Employees are on the road, or working from home. They need to be accessible to resolve issues and respond to business opportunities. Organizations that don't provide the tools mobile employees need to do their jobs will quickly lose their ability to keep pace with the productivity levels of their competition, and may even lose headcount to enterprises with a more attractive work environment.

So what exactly is Unified Communications?

Unified Communications is the ability for an employee to communicate in real time with anyone inside or outside their organization, regardless of their location and regardless of the end user technology that they have access to (cell phone, laptop, etc.). Unified Communications is a combination of Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR), Auto Attendant, Text-to-Speech (TTS) and other technologies in a format tailored to how a company does business. It is all designed to drive fluid communications, and maximize productivity, customer service and overall workflow within an organization.

Picture this scenario: A customer sends an urgent email to place a supply order with a sales representative at the last minute. The employee who receives the email is out of the office. Normally, this would end in a missed opportunity for the supplier. But with TTS, the rep. listens to his or her voice mail right on a cell phone. The sales rep. then dials into their company PBX, and speaks the name of another sales representative within the company. Using a feature known as "follow me", the system locates the second employee and dials them at their current location. There is a question about the order, so the second sales rep. uses an instant messenger function to contact a sales manager who is in a meeting. The sales manager answers the question over IM, allowing the order to be completed.

The first sales representative is notified by cell phone that the customer's order has been placed. The employee records a message to their client that the order has been processed successfully. This recording is converted into a WAV file. This file is attached to the original email and sent back to the customer as a reply. From the customer's perspective, they never knew that their sales contact was out of the office. All they know-or care about-is that their order was processed seamlessly.



The Value of Presence

The overriding concept that makes this scenario possible is known as "presence". Presence is the ability to instantly know the availability of someone, and the quickest way to communicate with that individual. Employees announce their "presence" using short message service (SMS) over a mobile phone, PDA or another mobile communication device. An organization starts to develop their presence by deploying IM over corporate networks as an addition to e-mail. Then it can be expanded to wider networks that include mobile devices. From there, a company can develop call communication profiles for its entire staff. Calendars, schedules and presence information integrate with the telephone system to automatically reroute incoming calls to the most suitable destination when staff are on leave, in a meeting, or temporarily working off site.

The bottom line is that your people are the most valuable capital asset that you have. By investing in their productivity, you are investing in the future growth of your business. And it's not as large an investment as you might think. Five years ago, deploying a Unified Communications platform would have been a \$100,000 investment, accessible only by the largest organizations. Today, you can deploy such a system starting at less than \$10,000. That's just a few dollars more than a sophisticated voice mail system and is definitely within the grasp of small-to-medium businesses.

Unified Communications is an investment worth its weight in gold, as it not only raises productivity, but increases customer satisfaction and the morale of your own employees. By adopting this new approach to doing business, you are taking the first step to building another kind of presence—the competitive kind.