

Focus on Unified Communications

Unified Communications in 2008

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As we move into 2008, here are some comments and predictions of what the year is likely to bring in the rapidly developing world of unified communications.

UC Applications. The key UC application winners in 2008 and beyond are collaboration, issue resolution, and support of voice and data mobility. Mobility, of course, is the hot story for 2008. UC will support a portal for mobile devices. In fact, the opportunity for portal applications will accelerate the move from ordinary cell phones to data devices like RIM, Nokia, and Motorola, using their own operating system or Windows Mobile.

Fundamental Shift in Communications. We see more and more business environments where people spend the entire work day inside a business application portal such as Salesforce.com, SAP, or a home-grown system. Between mobility solutions and applications enhanced with UC-based communications capabilities, the need for the desk phone withers away. In 2008, the disappearance of desk phones and traditional telephony accelerates. All of this continues to marginalize the PBX and those who supply them, although the crumbling market with not be very evident this year. However, watch for some moves late this year by traditional telecom suppliers who are nimble enough to jump onto the system integration train.

2008 will see the beginning of a long-term trend in which communications increasingly becomes incorporated into mobile devices, desktops, and applications solutions, and is less the province of traditional phone systems. Primary business communications will be embedded into the places where people work – desktops, laptops, mobile devices, web portals, applications systems, and more – rather than the separate, non-integrated device that Mr. Bell conceived of over a century ago.

Partnerships. All flavors of partnerships have been the rage in 2007. This trend will continue into 2008, which will bring the height of the co-opetition era. Later in 2008, lines will be more firmly drawn, and the pace of consolidation will increase. Those companies that haven't made good bets will face a long attrition.

Deployment. There are two fundamental ways to deploy unified communications. 1) Enhance productivity of the individual user, or 2) integrate communications directly into business processes and transform how work gets done. In both, the user can initiate the communications event. But in the second, the workflow software or a business application itself often triggers the communication when it is the next step in a process. And, we have shown that the business benefits in the second approach are often an order of magnitude greater.

2008 will see suppliers attempting both methods. A number of major suppliers are launching concerted sales efforts during the first half of this year, ramping up to a full scale sales push in the second half of 2008 and beyond. Many are promoting the "business process" approach with their sales teams. We will see whether this sales effort works or merely slips back into selling

IM to everyone in the customer site. Which way this goes will have a profound impact on the long-term success of UC.

We will see some new approaches to deployment, too. First, introduce UC concepts by deploying instant messaging and presence-enabled communications throughout the enterprise. Then, build on users' understanding of the concepts and personal benefits. Systematically identify business process areas in which transformational improvements can be made. The users will understand the personal benefits, and will be able to see how to extend those to other parts of the company, as well. This approach combines both wide-scale deployment and the biggest bottom line benefit opportunities.

Systems Integration. 2008 will see several innovative systems integrators "getting it" and successfully developing a substantial business using SDKs and APIs to integrate UC into business process applications. This will become a significant business opportunity in 2009.

Presence. Presence is a cornerstone of UC development. Beyond the issues raised above, the very concept of what "presence" means has to shift. Today, most people see presence as a "buddy list" of individuals. To enable many of the most transformational business process changes will require presence to be "flipped on its side." By that, I mean that presence will be organized, not by individual names, but by skills capabilities. In a business process transformation, the issue isn't so much "who" but "what skills". An insurance underwriter working on a policy quote needs an expert in industrial boilers (or whatever) – a skill, not someone she may know by name.

But, one of the disappointments of 2008 will be the lack of developments in presence. There will be continued lip service about federation and advanced functionality that would have driven the real business opportunities for UC. But I don't think that it will happen for three reasons: 1) doing it correctly is much more complex than most acknowledge publicly. 2) the industry will not make much headway trying to sell the kinds of applications that require rich presence. 3) each supplier thinks it can "own" the presence engine, diminishing incentives to really work together.

Social Networking. I mentioned that collaboration is a key application for UC. Well, it's one of social networking's claims to fame, too. We will see some innovative ways that these two will be coming together, but that isn't going to be a major 2008 development. But check back here twelve months from now. 2009 will see some major initiatives in this space.

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