

## **Unified Communications and Microsoft**

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in the August 2006 issue of *VON Magazine*

On June 26, Microsoft formally launched their entry into the unified communications (UC) market at a full-day event in San Francisco. Microsoft's announcement ushers yet another wave of change into the turbulent world of telephony, while users are still figuring out what to do about IP. This UC market, which [www.ucstrategies.com](http://www.ucstrategies.com) succinctly defines as "communications integrated to optimize business processes", has been emerging for the last year and a half. Cisco, IBM, Siemens, Avaya, HP, and many others have been busy redefining the concept of "unified communications." But Microsoft's voice, and a loud one of course, brings more credence to this unfolding market.

### **Microsoft's Announcement**

Microsoft has rolled out a product roadmap and what they call an "ecosystem" of partners with the goal of creating a person-centric communications environment. Their vision is to enable people to communicate easily and simply using whatever channel (voice, video, IM, email, etc.) is most appropriate among those available based on presence-enhanced, IM-like buddy lists.

To recap the product announcements, Microsoft will be delivering the Office Communications Server 2007. This renamed LCS is a SIP-based server that supports call management, softphones, conferencing (voice, video, and web), and manages IM and presence information. While Microsoft insisted that this isn't a PBX and it lacks a gazillion features, the OCS certainly has some very similar functionality and then moves beyond standard PBX fare. One of the more innovative aspects of the OCS is that it will support communications initiated from within Office programs such as Word or Outlook. Want to communicate with the author of the document you're reviewing? A mouse-click will show her presence-based availability, and initiate a discussion. That can be transformative.

In addition to the OCS, there is

- Office Communicator 2007, the client that includes softphone capabilities and which can access presence information, initiate and receive calls and conferences through OCS, and interact with Office software and Exchange messaging
- A range of phone instruments, developed with partners, that support scrolling through buddy lists and seeing real-time presence information to enable selection of a specific mode of communications
- Live Meeting, will work seamlessly with Office, supporting VoIP or TDM audio functionality. It will be available in both service and premise equipment configurations.

- Office Communicator RoundTable, a USB video conferencing device that features a 360 camera that will automatically focus on who is talking, or provide panorama views of all participants.

Microsoft has some challenges, of course. Here are three. First, most of these products won't be generally available for about a year. And, these announcements are largely tied to Office 2007. I've seen statistics showing that the adoption of Office 2003 has been slow, with companies resisting the cost and turmoil of upgrades. Such turmoil may be even more challenging for Office 2007, with new interfaces to learn, and the prospect of more extensive training hurdles.

Second, these announcements include many innovative ideas and capabilities. But if they are just positioned as productivity tools for knowledge workers and road warriors, I'm not sure how much CFOs will be willing to pay for them. What will be required is to demonstrate business impact – customer facing improvements, or real bottom line revenue enhancement or demonstrable hard-dollar savings. So while this new functionality has significant promise, it will have to be baked into applications and business processes to realize its full potential. Only then will UC move from the category of slick toy to one of indispensable tool for getting things done. That will take some time, and will likely involve developments by many of Microsoft's ecosystem partners.

Third, there will be a lot of FUD (fear, uncertainty, and doubt) thrown around over the next year. There will be talk of incomplete feature lists, viruses, reliability, and a variety of other issues. Microsoft doesn't exactly have a stellar record of introducing perfectly working products on the first release. And most people think of always-available communications capabilities as something guaranteed in the Constitution, or somewhere. Trusting mission critical systems to this technology could be viewed as a career-limiting option.

Don't misunderstand my raising these curmudgeonish issues. I'm delighted with Microsoft's leap into this stream. Certainly, it will roil the waters, and muddy them for awhile. But by joining Cisco, IBM, Avaya, and the other companies pushing out these new concepts and capabilities, their entry both validates the market direction and introduces some important new concepts. In the long run, that's going to be a very positive development for all end user companies.

### **What About Contact Centers?**

So what does all of this mean? None of Microsoft's announcements were targeted specifically at the contact center market. That's not surprising. Microsoft's focus tends to be on capabilities that enable individual users to design and control their own environment. That conception of their user base runs deep in their DNA. Contact center agents on the other hand generally don't get to decide what calls they will or won't accept. However, I think that Microsoft's announcements help encourage a trend that will significantly affect how contact centers work in the future.

Here's why. Historically, the specialized call routing and reporting functions of ACDs have been distinct from the functionality offered to standard PBX users. In fact, many companies have separate ACD and PBX systems with minimal interaction between them. The ACD is focused on external customers; the PBX features are designed for internal users. In the future, this internal/external split will become less distinct and may disappear. There are many groups outside the call center for which queuing, reporting, and other contact center capabilities would be helpful. Similarly, collaboration capabilities such as conferencing, messaging, and IM, which were previously concentrated on internal workgroups, are useful tools for agents. Some centers already use IM internally to facilitate collaboration. Unified communications will take this much further, and help merge these separate internal and external paths.

Let's look at just one example of how intermingling this functionality can bring new ways of achieving goals. First call resolution is becoming an increasingly important objective for contact centers. There are several reasons for this, but they boil down to critical fundamentals – greater customer satisfaction and lower costs. Callers expect their orders to be taken or their questions answered. Now. And processes designed around someone researching an answer and calling back are increasingly cumbersome and expensive.

Here are several approaches to achieving first call resolution:

- Skills-based routing strategies that send the call to an agent with credentials best suited to answering the question
- A two-stage manual process, where an agent screens the call, and then routes it to the best agent queue
- Knowledge bases and other expert systems to provide detailed information to whichever agent gets the call
- Methods to enable an agent to access experts in other departments who can be conferenced into the call to provide specialized assistance on the spot

There are opportunities with each of these, but for this column, I'm going to focus on the fourth. We're starting to see the informal use of IM as a way for agents to locate an expert, certainly within the center itself. Today, IM is based on buddy lists – individuals. But the agent needs an expert with certain skills, not a particular person. Hmm. Sounds like a skill-based queue to me, but one that's focused on internal experts within the company. And, in the future, the IM link could be to a skill type, not to a person. These experts typically have other work to do, so a robust presence component will be critical. When an appropriate, available expert is located, agents will be able to quickly bring them into a conversation with the caller by using IP-enabled conferencing.

That example shows how IM can enhance a concept that is easily understood, because it's an extension of how contact centers might work today. And certainly, many interactions are perfectly suited to being handled by the contact center.

But, let's expand our thinking. Today, agents in contact centers interact with callers even when the caller really needs to reach someone else - a technical specialist, a salesman working on an order, a researcher gathering information, someone who can expedite a delayed shipment, or groups of internal staff who need to work together to meet a customer requirement.

Current communications technology limits the way outside callers can interact directly with our internal specialists. Therefore, we now have contact centers and agents who field calls and do the best that they can. But, if the vision is to be "partners" with our best customers, then breaking down the barriers that hamper rapid and effective collaboration both internally and externally will be a key to business transformation. UC provides the conceptual framework and the functionality toolkit to help design, develop, and implement these capabilities, and to achieve these transformational results.

### **What's Microsoft's Role in Contact Centers?**

Microsoft's announcements will hasten the development of these kinds of capabilities. They have embraced SIP and have invited partners and others in their ecosystem to use available APIs and SDKs to create specialized applications and to embed their functionality into a broad range of business processes. This will enable their partners and systems integrators to craft specific offerings for the contact center market, as well as for many other vertical and horizontal markets. While they did not announce any specific contact center plans during the UC launch, Microsoft confirmed that their partners will be designing and selling specific capabilities to this market.

The announcements from Microsoft and others are redefining this market. With a bit of imagination, we can see the potential of where it can evolve to link internal and external collaboration. Work will be needed, however, to bring this vision to a reality. Beyond the development work of the integrators, end user companies should certainly consider the impact of UC on their communications architecture plans, and start envisioning how these capabilities fit into their environment.

### **What Should Users Do?**

Update your understanding of emerging UC, and how communications and collaboration will work in the future. I suggest developing a three to five year plan to identify those business processes that could be dramatically improved through better collaboration. In many cases, this effort could alter technology investment decisions. Part of that planning may include creating some pilot opportunities, and starting to get first hand experience with UC's potential within your company.

We've seen many examples over the years of how innovation has transformed the way businesses operate, including the explosion of contact center capabilities ten to fifteen years ago, and the growing sophistication of web portals starting about five years ago. I think that unified communications offers some of the same potential.

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