Stop playing phone tag

How unified communications help provide better customer service

INTERVIEWED BY ROGER VOZAR

Traditional desktop phones are on the way out, as companies discover that unified communications software now provides additional and more convenient ways to communicate and share messages with employees and clients.

"When voice over Internal protocol (VoIP) was introduced, many capabilities were promised. With the recent uptick in real-time communication services — instant messaging (IM), presence information, video conferencing, speech recognition, etc. — being used in conjunction with non-real-time communication — voicemail, email and fax, we're finally seeing some of those capabilities being implemented and the promises of VoIP finally being delivered," says Jeff Beller, IT and telecom consultant with Skoda Minotti Technology Partners.

Smart Business spoke with Beller about unified communications and how it enables companies to be more efficient.

What is meant by unified communications?
Unified communications has evolved to now deliver more fully on the promises of VoIP — to streamline communications so as to accelerate it, extend its reach and afford efficient means of collaboration. Recent advances in presence and mobility technologies have made it more useful.

Unified communications is software that brings different communication into a single user interface. The software provides presence, voice, IM, ad hoc collaboration — audio or video, and online meeting capabilities — all viewed, monitored, initiated and controlled via a single unifying application. All communication modes are connected so that workers and clients are able to get help at that moment in time.

As a comparison, only 20 to 30 percent of calls are answered when using more

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traditional services with most calls going to voicemail. The phone tag scenario and 'I'm not available, please leave a message,' won't differentiate you from the competition.

What equipment is needed?
You need a VoIP-enabled phone system. The software application can run on your desktop, smartphone or tablet so it's not only unifying *communications*, but also the *various devices*. Your smartphone turns into an office desk phone, and when you leave the office, a caller automatically reaches you. It's not call forwarding; it behaves like your office desk phone with the same number and controls like transferring or conferencing.

Manufacturers that offer VoIP also have unified communications applications (chat, presence information, etc.), or you can use a third-party application, like Microsoft Lync, with those VoIP systems. Have a needs and readiness assessment performed to learn what are your needs, understand what is out there and then decide what works best. It's best to work with a consultant who can demonstrate different manufacturers and technologies, rather than just one offering.

How does 'presence' work?
Presence makes communications more efficient by mining data in your Outlook calendar and, when you're unavailable, switching availability off for your instant

messenger or phone system. It can tell how you'd prefer to be reached or who to contact in your absence. Also, if there's no keyboard activity for 15 minutes, others can see you're likely not at your desk. This information populates a dashboard in the unified communications interface that also controls calling, instant messaging and conferencing.

The real-time display of intelligent presence information, combined with mobility, really benefits a receptionist, who can direct the caller to the right person almost instantly. Fewer calls go to voicemail, so clients are served better. Similarly, field service staff can communicate with co-workers more efficiently to solve problems faster and provide better customer service.

What's the future of unified communications?
The need for a desk phone will become less as workers acclimate to using unified communications software on their desktops. Presence technology also will improve with multiple datapoint mining for instant assessment of communication states. As this state becomes more granular and meaningful, it drives 'smart' communication routing. And, as 'always-on-and-always-connected' mobile devices (smartphones and tablets) are integrated into the corporate network infrastructure, the use and significance of desk phones will dissipate. ●