

## 10 Tips For Successfully Transforming Your Business With Unified Communications

Unified Communications (UC) continues to be heavily used by IT solution vendors. UC is in fact a very unique and organizational specific proposition that requires a thorough understanding of an organization's business practices and requirements. Often this is overlooked and the leap into Unified Communications ends with confusion about how to use it, how to integrate it into business processes, and most importantly how to recoup the investment. Rather than having your organization add another headstone to this UC graveyard there are several things you can do to maximize the effectiveness of a UC solution for your business.

Before we explore the 10 areas it is first important to review why UC is unique. Technology in itself is an enabling tool. It helps to automate many complex tasks and it underpins many business processes. In general most business cases do not explore the need for process change, nor do many technology implementation project plans have business process change as part of the project deliverables. This is where UC is different. Without deep planning, consideration and targeted change management in business process, UC will FAIL!

### 1. Start with a communications strategy

Far too often UC projects are technology based, leveraging communication tools like presence, instant messaging and point-to-point video conferencing for end users. These technologies certainly improve the productivity of the user however they are not strategic in nature.

It is imperative for an organization to create a structured Communications Strategy covering more than just the basic elements of UC. This Communications Strategy should include:

- A detailed user profile assessment based on current and future requirements for communication tools.
- A business outcome roadmap identifying key business outcomes and the improvements expected as a result of the investment in UC.
- A business process change program including a detailed review of current processes, identification of how they will be changed or replaced to take advantage of the new tools being implemented, and some discussion on change management activity.
- A technology roadmap that clearly articulates the implementation phases from a communication tools perspective and maps these enablers to business process changes taking into consideration desktop software, security, mobility, policies and infrastructure

Without a mature Communication Strategy this will just become an isolated IT project.

### 2. Identify your user communities

Unified Communications is all about the user. Each organization will have many different profiles of users including both internal ones for employees and contractors and external ones for customers, suppliers and partners. Understanding each community, the tools they have today, and the tools they will need in the future to support the new business processes and models is critically important.

Many organizations fail to adequately profile the user community including only a subset of actual job functions like executive, administration and finance. These types of profiles lack a more thorough definition required to adequately handle the plethora of different users that are touched by UC in the form of communication tools, security, mobility, and policies.

The simplest approach to capture the entire user base is to create a detailed matrix identifying each user type, the communication tools they use today, and a best guess of the tools you believe they will need in 5 years. This matrix is a critical part of the Communications Strategy, but cannot be completed until business processes have been overlaid.

### **3. Review current business processes**

Often an organization simply assumes that UC can improve their existing business processes without much analysis. More often than not however, the organization will find that they have actually derived no discernable business value from UC. This is usually the result of an ineffective business change process, misunderstanding of the user base or simply the organization's inability to measure the success and desired outcomes from implementing the technology. For example implementing a costly video conferencing and collaboration system will not save an organization any money if:

- A policy is not enforced to use it as a mandatory alternative to business travel;
- An understanding of which users would benefit from it has not been performed;
- And a clear way to measure the success and cost savings of adopting the solution has not been established.

Do not assume that UC will inherently offer business value. Undertake a complete review of the existing business process, understand who will benefit and why, and clearly define metrics to avoid unnecessary changes to your organization.

### **4. Understand the difference between the Individual and Organisation**

The benefit of individual UC is that it allows people to connect and interact more quickly, efficiently and for a lower cost. Users can leverage presence, instant messaging, Voice over IP, video conferencing and application sharing to allow them to be better connected in real-time with the resources they need. However these tools are simply an evolution of normal two-way communication and while they enable a more efficient work environment they may not directly benefit the organization.

At the organization level UC is used as a tool to redefine the way in which groups of people work. Organizational UC is where the largest net return for a company is achieved and looks at the future of communication tools such as business networking sites, Wiki's, and workspaces to open up a fundamentally different approach to the way workgroups and teams interact and share information.

A business case should be built with both the individual and the organization in mind and should explore the business benefits resulting from each. A common mistake is for people to build the business case strictly on the benefits to the individual. However, in doing so the real business benefits promised by UC through business transformation are not achieved.

### **5. Recognise that UC is more than just an evolution of communications**

UC has so many definitions that many people are becoming sceptics. Typical definitions include dozens of buzzwords like IM, VoIP, IP Telephony and Presence. However, this is the utilitarian definition of UC. Defining UC as a concept; the concept being the evolution of business processes and communications tools to help people interact and share information more effectively across any media or device; is much easier to digest.

UC is about connecting users and getting the right information to the right people at the right time in the right format. UC can encompass many tools that would often not be

considered in a traditional business context, yet offer enormous value in the evolving hyper-connected world including:

- Wikis – primarily a document sharing tool, Wikis are a great way to create evolving, up to date documentation in a format that is easy to maintain and available to all
- Blogs – driven by a particular user’s perspective a blog is a very powerful tool to create focus and purpose for teams working together
- Social Networking sites (SNS) – while perhaps not recognized as a business tool, social networking is emerging as the de facto way for communities of interest to exchange ideas and manage a personal presence on the network. With a slight change to the main focus of such a site a business can derive tremendous benefit by enabling users to share ideas, stay connected and feel part of a larger community. Organizations are now beginning to realize the benefits of social networking and have developed their own “Business Networking” sites to realign the Social Networking focus to real business needs.

Whatever definition you use for UC, do not fall into the trap of UC being merely a limited set of technologies you buy from a technology vendor. It is about looking at all communication tools and identifying how they can improve human interaction and information sharing.

## **6. Prepare for a journey**

This is a journey, not a project.

If run as an IT project there will be a defined start and end date. The most common pitfall in this area is when an organization literally stops the transformation effort when the IT project completes.

A Communications Strategy is a 3-5 year proposition. During which time there will be many IT projects. You must understand that UC will never be a “completed project”. Rather it is a continual evolution of communication tools and business transformation.

By defining your Unified Communications journey as a business transformation project with appropriate sub projects (both IT and process), you will be able to realize the desired business outcomes.

## **7. Actively involve your users in the transformation process**

Ask anyone in your organization what they find frustrating about communication and each will provide a litany of issues and solutions to make their job easier. Granted an organization can’t tailor a unique solution for every individual however assuming some basic communication needs and optimizing those will provide benefits for all users.

It is safe to assume that everyone needs access to generic information and other users at any time. Providing 24x7 access to information and people is not difficult but providing the right information to the right people requires more thought.

Successful transformation takes place when users are actively involved in the direct identification of process improvement for their work. Ask each person if they could change three things about the way they communicate with other employees, customers or suppliers, what would they do? Consolidating these ideas across an organization opens up new ideas and allows users to be part of the process.

## **8. Training is essential**

As technologists we often forget that the typical user may not know how to use these communication tools. Simply installing it does not imply users can or will use it. Clearly articulating why and how UC can be used is an important part of the Communication Strategy.

A key foundation to success is process training with associated training on the tools. Presence, for example, can provide significant efficiency improvements for effective communication. However if a user does not know how to update their presence or how to select an ideal communication tool based on a target user's presence then this benefit is lost. Other similar functions could be invaluable in evolving a process to be far more effective. Remember the technology is merely an enabling toolset and as with any business tools proper training is essential.

## 9. Focus on change management

Many transformational activities fail due to poor change management. Without a structured change management program owned and executed by appropriate executives you may achieve some minor individual UC gains but you will not transform the business. Change management as an activity is about the entire business buying in and passionately embracing the outcomes. This is achieved only if they see direct value in the invested time and disruption. For UC this can be best achieved by following many of the tips outlined previously.

The most successful way to deliver long-term business outcomes is to have a senior executive owner who champions this transformation and constantly asks the question, "How can we interact and share information better?" This might require defining a new leadership role in your organization such as Chief Communications Officer. As information based workers, communication is your core product, so make sure there is visible executive ownership.

## 10. Consider expert advice

Transformation alone cannot be achieved without new and evolving technology and unifying that technology is critical.

To unify communications you need to look not at the technology you are buying but rather at what information will be shared via these technologies. A solution or application integrator who understands workflow management, emerging web technologies and information integration is essential to the success of the program. Furthermore, having exposure to a large base of successful business transformation projects an integrator can draw on the experience you need to drive your business. More importantly, working with the right technology partner will ensure a unified communications solution delivers the benefits you need and expect.

## Summary

There are no shortcuts to a successful business transformation through unified communications. It is a journey your organization will inevitably take and it is an evolution that will be driven through business transformation and genuine market competitiveness and customer expectations.

Is your organization a leader or a follower? Are you committed to successful business transformation? When UC is approached as a business transformation strategy with the appropriate executive commitment and a deep focus on change management your organization will emerge as a business optimized leader in this new hyper-connected world.