

What is Unified Communications, Really?



Unified Communications is the same thing as Unified Messaging, right? Not at all. This can be a common misconception partly because of the similarity in names and also because Unified Messaging can convert speech communications to text and visa versa.

Unified Communications is really about simplifying the user experience. In today's work place, employees have to deal with multiple forms of communication. In fact, a study¹ conducted by the Sage Research group in 2005 concluded that as of September 2005, business and technology decision makers averaged having at least six communication devices and each employee had almost five communications applications to manage.

That's not expected to dramatically improve anytime soon. In another survey² from the Telecom Intelligence Group that was performed in 2007, they found that by 2009, over 40% of enterprise IP telephony users expect to have two or more devices that can access the features of their voice systems as well as Unified Communication applications. In addition, up to a third of Enterprise IP telephony users could justify replacing their desk phone with an advanced wireless phone in five years.



So what is the industry definition of unified communications? Currently, there isn't one. **Unified Communications is confusing because the concept is so new and there are lots of different ideas and definitions of what comprises Unified Communications.** The vendors and analysts have different opinions about what protocols, applications, and features should be/not be included within unified communications.

The following list summarizes a sample of the different definitions:

- Definition from Gartner (Magic Quadrant Report, 2006)
 - “Gartner defines UC products (equipment, software, and services) as those that enhance individual, workgroup, and organizational productivity by enabling and facilitating the control, management, integration and use of multiple enterprise communication methods.”
- Definition from Yankee (Unified Communications Leverages Existing Technology to Increase Productivity, July 2003)
 - The concept of unified communications ... is to break down all distance, time, and media barriers to allow people to communicate with one another anywhere, anytime, and across any medium from a single device.

- Definition from Microsoft (Microsoft website, June 2007)
 - “Unified Communications bridge the gap between telephony and computing to deliver real-time messaging, voice, and conferencing to the desktop environment.”
- Definition from Cisco (Enhancing Business with Smarter, More Effective Communications Whitepaper, 2007)
 - “Unified Communications is an emerging class of applications and services designed to improve communications within the modern organization – to keep workgroups connected, enable them to collaborate effectively, and streamline business processes.”
- Definition from Strategic Path International (What is Unified Communications? And Is It Worth the Extra Investment, 2007)
 - “Unified Communications integrates existing communication methods like instant messaging, email, voice telephony and audio and video conferencing, making it possible for each interaction to work across different hardware devices.”
- Definition from Forrester Research (Unified Communication Industry Study, 2006)
 - “Unified Communications is not about replacing existing applications; it is about improving the functionality of existing applications through the use of SIP, which enables businesses to connect quickly to the intended party for actionable results.”
- Definition from Wikipedia
 - None. Only Unified Messaging shows up.
- Definition from NEC
 - Unified Communication enables customers to experience greater productivity through the convergence of communication channels and business processes using a combination of technologies, devices and services, including presence, status, mobility, collaboration, video and voice conferencing, and messaging.

As you can see, depending upon who is talking about unified communications, the story changes. A common theme does emerge. Unified Communications focuses on communications for the user. If we then extrapolate back from this, elements of a Unified Communication portfolio could include the following:

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|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| • User Mobility | • Conferencing (voice, video and web) |
| • Presence | • Instant messaging |
| • Telephony (voice, fax, etc.) | • Administration and management |
| • Voicemail/unified messaging | • Contact center |
| • Email/calendaring | |

A pictorial representation of this would look like the following:



Mobility typically ranks as one of the top drivers for Unified Communications.

This is because all of the applications referenced above can be combined to create a flexible and scalable solution for employee mobility. In a study³ performed by J. Gold Associates in 2006, most enterprises ranked mobility and mobile worker deployments within their top five initiatives for 2006 – 2009. J. Gold Associates went on to further predict that by the end of 2009, 65% of enterprise mobile workers will have smart phones and other wireless devices (PDA's etc). In addition, 75% of enterprise users will migrate from “dumb” phones to smart phones by 2008.

Other drivers tend to be more vertically focused. For instance, ACD products are a primary driver for call centers while Instant Messaging is more important for retail and investment banking/brokerages. Besides simple Voice over Internet Protocol capability, Unified Communications provides the applications that deliver ROI savings. This is where the companies that have invested in IP telephony see the savings. While toll bypass does deliver some cost reduction to businesses, the real value is in the applications.

If we break Unified Communications down further into usable functions, this list summarizes the key benefits for businesses:

- Allows companies to react to change better and faster
- Creates an expanded business reach
- Improves business continuity scenarios
- Improves Customer Service
- Results in fewer integration issues/costs for the IT department
- Industry standard solution for interoperability
- Ability to optimize geographically diverse people (seamless teaming)
- Low product and administration costs
- Lower training costs with integrated solution
- Productivity improvement due to less mail boxes to manage

From an end user perspective, these are the key user benefits for unified communications:

- Empowers users with single number reach
- Delivers rich Presence
- Results in speedier decision making
- Collaboration (application & doc. sharing, whiteboard, chat)
- Enables Instant Messaging
- Easier for end users because there are fewer devices to manage
- Reduces travel costs
- New IVR services for users

The greatest user benefits are single number reach and rich presence. Between these two features, the user can control who contacts them and by what medium (terminal) that is best for the user. Available options also include no contact, i.e. a diversion to voicemail or another number if that is preferred. The main point is that the user is able to take back control and manage their devices instead of their devices managing them.

Please see the NEC website at www.necunifiedsolutions.com for more information about how you can use NEC products and solutions to meet your business goals.

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1. Unified Communications Application: Uses and Benefits, Sage Research. January 2006
 2. Has Unified Communications Found Its Killer App? Telecom Intelligence Group. June 2007.
 3. Compliance in the Mobile Enterprise, J. Gold Associates. April 2006.

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