



# Unified communications plans should tap CIO

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As a midmarket CIO, you may need to pull out your diplomacy skills when it comes to guiding the planning and implementation of a [unified communications](#) (UC) project at your company. Patient planning and maintaining some level of skepticism toward vendors' claims will also help.

"There's a lot of nonsense out there," said Neal Shact, CEO of CommuniTech Services Inc., an Arlington Heights, Ill.-based consultancy and systems integrator focused on unified communications deployments. Evaluating solutions offered by competing vendors, often from three different categories -- [networking, applications](#) (such as customer relationship management software) or telephony -- takes tact. While the CIO shouldn't get bogged down in the detail level of any of these solutions, it's important not to let one vendor group take over the planning process.

The best way to create an optimal unified communications plan is to set up a group composed of interdisciplinary group members, e.g., people from telecommunications, operations, IT and the business side. "The group has to get together and talk about the UC mission using a common picture and a common language," said Bern Elliot, a vice president and distinguished analyst in Gartner Inc.'s Philadelphia office.

Ideally, Elliot agreed, no one group should dominate these discussions. "The CIO's direction here is very important. He has to make sure that the team is truly working together and that certain members aren't tuned in to one set of vendors and one set of messages," he noted.

Getting the definition straight is also important, he added. One business manager may pine for better conferencing capabilities, while another has unified messaging at the top of his wish list.

Unified communications can be defined in many ways, particularly at the midmarket level, Elliot said. At many midmarket companies the basics of unified communications are already in place. In April, a Gartner survey of 300 midmarket companies with more than 400 employees showed that 82% are already using email. Sixty-nine percent are already using voice messaging, followed by 63% with calendar and scheduling applications in place. Forty-one percent use instant messaging (IM). But these statistics can be misleading, Elliot said: Only 28% of the

companies surveyed are using these applications in a unified manner.

The advantages respondents sought by implementing unified communications are familiar ones. In the study, 44% of companies cited improved speed of communications across the business, while "competitive advantage" was cited by 26%. Thirty-nine percent listed better communications for distributed sites or remote workers and mobile workforce members. Collaboration improvements were listed by 29%.

No matter what technologies you employ, unified communications should enable a business to operate more efficiently and make good decisions faster. "Companies realize that they're doing things the old way. Email is asynchronous. If they continue to do business the old way, they're missing out on the overall value of unified communications to the business: rapid problem resolution and the ability to move farther, faster than the other guy," said Elizabeth Herrell, a vice president at Cambridge, Mass.-based Forrester Research Inc.

Shact echoed Herrell's viewpoint. "At its most basic level, unified communications is about people being able to leave a variety of messages [types] and being able to respond to those message [types] in a variety of ways in near real time," he said.

Taking a more tactical view, Irwin Lazar, principal analyst and program director for unified communications at The Nemertes Research Group Inc. in Mokena, Ill., advised companies to "tie new unified communications applications to a specific business process so that it lowers latency and speeds up decision making."

The Carlsbad Unified School District in Carlsbad, Calif., has experienced firsthand the advantages of speedier messaging. The district comprises 14 schools with a total of 10,700 students. Over the course of a three-year project that will be finished in December, the school district has replaced its T1 lines with fiber optic cabling for faster, cheaper networking, said Rick Lewis, CIO. The unified messaging communications project also allows voice messages to be displayed via email, he said. "This is a very useful thing for teachers," Lewis said. The next phase of the project will update the district's networking gear including switches, routers and Voice over Internet Protocol and wireless access capabilities.

For Lewis, justifying the project and mapping the process was relatively easy because of the district's nonprofit status. State-mandated programs for energy conservation provided funding for the project. Lewis said the district uses Cisco Systems Inc. networking equipment, so it was a natural thing to use Cisco's Unified Communications Suite for the messaging integration bridging email and voicemail.

### **Drawing up your roadmap**

Once your goals are set and your UC plan is drawn up, it's time to compare your roadmap with those of the vendors you're choosing among. Just as important, you need to see where multiple vendor roadmaps match up with each other, because there will be multiple vendors, advised Gartner's Elliot.

Don't get hung up on best-of-breed claims, either. "You don't have to have best of breed anymore, because the functionality is pretty much there in all the vendor offerings," Elliot said. "Making sure the vendors you've chosen can play nicely together is almost equally important."

Even so, integration problems aren't rare. In the same Gartner study mentioned above, 38% of the 300 companies surveyed reported problems integrating unified communications applications with existing equipment. Forty-three percent reported nonspecific "technical problems" with their UC deployments. While today's users will tolerate a certain level of problems, the expectations for problem-free implementations will increase during the next few years, according to the report.

### **Still too early to be too late**

And it's still early in the game at the midmarket level, according to "[Unified Communications Adoption Plans](#)," a Forrester report issued in June. The survey of 184 communication decision makers showed 57% of companies at either the piloting or evaluation stage of a unified communications strategy. Sixteen percent were in the rollout process and only 11% were already fully deployed.

Unified messaging is a common place to start with UC, but the IM or "*presence*" category will become increasingly important, said both Gartner's Elliot and Forrester's Herrell. Instant messaging is the most rudimentary of UC tools that enable presence. "IM has elements of real time and it's persistent," Elliot said. Building intelligence into instant messaging and integrating it with desktop call control will make it much easier to find and communicate with employees.

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Fred Dougherty  
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Trust

[Desktop call control](#) -- the integration of telephony and computer technology -- is a more advanced way to locate and communicate with employees. Currently used mostly by call centers, this capability will be extended much further in the future, Elliot said. Advanced versions will be able to track IP addresses and ring your home phone if you're using a home computer, for example. These types of products will be available in about three years, he added.

This presence capability will be imbued with contextual features as well, Elliot said. "Contextual presence," or the capability to have communications features integrated with business applications, is another emerging area. Intuitive access to subject matter experts could help lower human resources costs or increase sales by increasing the knowledge of potential customers. For example, a contextual presence capability set up for a benefits department at a large university could quickly direct a caller to the proper benefits level. Registering the incoming phone number and linking it automatically to a caller's employee record and even to details within that record will be possible, Elliot said.

Regardless of how advanced or rudimentary the UC tool or capability, the expectation of being able to reach employees in near real time has become common through the use of cell phones

and personal digital assistants.

In June, Liberty Property Trust, in concert with MobileAccess Networks Inc. and Comcast Corp., [opened the Comcast Center](#), Philadelphia's tallest building. The newcomer boasts 58 stories and 1.25 million square feet and will provide office space for more than 2,900 Comcast employees. The building's infrastructure was designed to support continuous communications, said Fred Dougherty, vice president, portfolio technology, at Liberty Property Trust.

Malvern, Pa.-based Liberty Property Trust developed and owns Comcast Center and will provide operations for the building. The [MobileAccess Universal Wireless Network](#) ensures building-wide wireless access and provides a strong signal for major cellular communications providers. "People don't want to walk into a building and lose contact with the office. That's huge in today's environment," Dougherty said. "If you don't plan for unified communications from the beginning, you're going to have an obsolete building once you open it up."