

UC MORPHS INTO SOCIAL COLLABORATION

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Since its inception, unified communications (UC) has been in continuous evolution. Originally growing out of the idea of unified messaging where, all of a user's emails, voicemails and faxes would be accessed through a single integrated mailbox, UC integrates all of the user's communications tools, voice/video/email/text into a single interface to provide colleagues' availability status or "presence", and allow the user to set up a voice or video call, or generate an email or text with a single click. The implied assumption was this would speed the adoption of softphone clients on PCs and result in the demise of the desk set, but that hasn't happened yet.

IBM was first to use the acronym UC&C, recognizing the importance of "collaboration" as the key capability of UC. By that point, the platforms had advanced to support audio and video conferencing as well as web collaboration and screen sharing. Many vendors stopped using the term "UC" in their marketing and focused on collaboration, e.g., Cisco's UC&C products are now housed in its "Collaboration Technology Group." The general feeling was that buyers were confused about what "unified communications" meant, and the benefits of improved "collaboration" would better resonate.

We are now at the start of a new phase in the development of UC&C, which pundits call "social collaboration". Some have tried to inject the term "Workstream Communications and Collaboration", but social collaboration seems to be catching on. While these new offerings integrate the UC&C communication and collaboration tools, they are now part of a broader idea: tools to help organizations better manage collaborative projects.

Unify was first with a test product called Project Ansible; they subsequently changed the name to Circuit. Cisco followed a year later with Project Squared, which was renamed Spark. Interactive Intelligence introduced one called PureCloud, Acano (now part of Cisco) added coSpace, Mitel renamed its MiCollab as MiTeam, and Avaya's version is called Zang Spaces (part of its Zang division). Interestingly, Microsoft does not have a "product" per se that fits into this category but with the combination of the Groups function in Skype for Business, along with Outlook, Exchange, SharePoint and Yammer, it has all of the necessary piece parts. There are also a number of social collaboration options that are growing up outside of the UC&C community, the most successful being Slack.

Some question where social collaboration fits relative to UC&C. While some see it taking UC&C to the next level of functionality, I view it more as a new type of tool, one geared to a different customer requirement and supporting a different set of tasks than traditional UC&C. For customers whose needs are primarily centered on communications, traditional UC&C may still be the more appropriate tool; however, if there is a need to organize and manage collaborative projects, with multiple participants, potentially scattered across the globe, social collaboration may provide not only more functional and efficient communications and collaboration, but offer a way to organize the project and all of the data and documents around it.

Let's take a closer look at how social collaboration platforms work, and the role they play in managing collaborative projects.

HOW NOT TO COLLABORATE: EMAIL

Let's first look at how collaborative projects are typically managed today. The basic premise of social collaboration is that email, based on its multi-address and archiving capabilities, has become the primary tool for coordinating collaborative projects- but it's a poor choice. When a project begins, everyone creates an address group with participants' email addresses, and the emails start to fly. Different parties might be responsible for different sections of the project, but inevitably everyone receives all of the emails whether they are relevant to them or not. Then they waste time reading them to be sure they're not relevant before they delete them or file them away.

If the output of the project is a document, presentation or report, version control problems inevitably occur. That's when you get different team members editing to the report at the same time- this is also called "forking." In many cases, different people start editing from different versions that have been created. At some point, someone realizes there are two separate documents being developed and gets the unenviable, time-consuming job of combining the changes to recreate a single version. If two different people have made edits to the same section, you now must decide which one to keep. And the farther past the forking point you are when this discovery is made, the more onerous (and time-consuming) the task of combining the edits.

Sometimes the problem can be fixed by establishing a common store for the work product like SharePoint or Google Docs, but that is still no guarantee versions won't duplicate, particularly if there is no established system of numbering the different versions.

There's also the problem of determining "how we got here." Who changed it, when did they change it and what data or decision caused them to make that change? Don't rely on the Track Changes function in Microsoft Word to address that, because typically there are so many edits that at some point you have to Accept them and then all of the "fingerprints" are lost.

This starts an even longer (and essentially non-productive) effort to go back and examine all of the earlier versions (assuming they have been retained and adhere to the agreed upon version numbering system), determine who made that change, and confirm that they were working with good data and management approval.

Anyone who has ever worked on a project team recognizes these issues and likely can add any number of additional nightmare scenarios that lead to hours of wasted time and lost productivity. Add in the fact that many team members working on this project are likely working on other projects at the same time, and it's clear why so many businesspeople rail about the amount of time they spend processing emails rather than doing productive work!

Social collaboration tools offer another alternative.

WHAT IS A "SOCIAL COLLABORATION PLATFORM"?

A social collaboration platform is a computer-based (often cloud-based) system that organizes and manages all the communications and documentation involved in a collaborative project.

That project might be the development of a document, presentation or report, or it could be a task like organizing a company's participation in a trade show.

When the project is initiated, a project "room" is established in the platform; Cisco and most others call it a "room", but Unify calls it a "conversation." All team members have access to the room, and other team members can be added as needed. Managers might be given access to all of the rooms of all of their direct reports so they can monitor the progress of the various projects.

The first UC&C capability provided is persistent chat, either individual chat or group chat. Through this, all parties see the issues being discussed and contribute as appropriate. Also, any documentation related to the project is stored as well. Along with persistent chat, the social collaboration client can provide one-click access to voice or video connections and to multiparty audio or videoconferences with web conference and screen sharing support. Most importantly, all of the communications relative to the project and all of the work product produced are stored in a single shared repository with the ability to track who made changes and when.

Users are able to access to the room from any device as long as they have network access. There are clients for Windows and Mac desktops and laptops, as well as mobile apps for Apple's iOS, Android, and other mobile platforms. Any user connected to the platform is able to switch between rooms for any of their projects. Since virtually all the communications involved in the projects are now housed in the social collaboration platform, users report significant decreases (i.e. on the order of 70%) in the volume of email they wade through every day.

As you might imagine, the amount of information from chats, reference documents, meeting agendas, meeting notes, and even recordings of the meetings themselves can be staggering. That's why one key component of the platform is the search function that allows users to quickly find any piece of supporting information with a quick keyword search.

In the end, UC&C and social collaboration solves two different problems. UC&C makes communications and collaboration more efficient and effective, and as time goes by, we will see those communication and collaboration tools embedded in an ever-expanding range of applications. While they have communication and collaboration capabilities embedded in them, social collaboration tools are more focused on providing users with the tools they need to execute collaborative projects more efficiently and effectively than they could be with general purpose tools like email.

As always, the keys are to understand the task, to evaluate the potential tools with an eye towards the requirements of that task, and to choose the most appropriate tool to get the job done.

HOW TO BE SUCCESSFUL WITH SOCIAL COLLABORATION

As with any new capability, social collaboration tools require planning, training and management. The first key is to find the tools that work most effectively in your organization. As this will be a new experience to almost everyone involved, this might

require you to test different platforms in different functional areas, noting their strengths and weaknesses, and polling users for their feedback. IT should likely be one of the areas tested, as the IT staff will need first hand experience to understand and evaluate the feedback.

The second key point is that all of the people in the organization that will be collaborating should be on the same platform. That does not mean the entire organization has to standardize on one platform; if the marketing department does not have any need to collaborate with finance, it would be perfectly fine to have different platforms for those two groups. However, you do not want to have the same person using one platform for some projects and a different platform for others.

The initiative must have management endorsement and 100% employee buy-in to work. Participation in the social collaboration platform cannot be “optional.” If one team member refuses to cooperate and only uses email to communicate with other team members, the entire purpose (and with it the potential efficiency gain that could be made) is lost. The social collaboration platform has to become THE WAY that users in that organization collaborate.

While use of the social collaboration clients is fairly straight forward, don’t assume training is not necessary. Training in the basic operation of the client should be fairly minimal. The training that is really needed is on how to work within the specific UC&C platform.

As projects are launched and executed, some thought must be given to how information is organized. While the search engines are powerful, if you are searching on keywords, everyone should use the same keywords or some sources won’t be found. With an email-based system, each individual organized his or her own files, often in Outlook folders. Under UC&C, files are centralized, so you need ground rules about how items are organized, labeled and tracked.

Multi-topic chats can be especially problematic, since team members may be working together on multiple projects. It is important that while they are chatting in a room dedicated to one particular project, they don’t switch topics and start chatting about another project. One of the key ideas in social collaboration is that all of the information relevant to a particular project be stored in that project’s room. If chats start switching between rooms, that information will likely not be available to the search engine and wouldn’t be seen by other team members.

Unless users understand the critical importance of doing things the same way, you run the risk of a system just inefficient and time consuming as email.

THE RESULTS

The most visible effect of a successful social collaboration platform installation should be a notable decrease in the volume of email. But, the more subtle and far more important impact will be on user productivity. Now, rather than having to wade through hundreds of emails each day, many with no direct impact on each person’s responsibilities, all team members can scan group bulletin boards and chats and get a fast update on what’s going on in the project and what they have to do next.

In an organization that truly adopts a social collaboration solution, that app should be the primary tool team members work with for much of the day. While they may also use apps like Word or PowerPoint to create content, the outputs will eventually be stored and shared through the collaboration platform. And with all of the user's communications and collaboration tools embedded in the collaboration platform, there will be less need for them to switch between apps.

Essentially, a social collaboration platform is a new way of working, and one that is far more efficient for the types of task and the types of people we work with today. Not only does the platform organize the information, provide search-based access and embedded communications, and allow users to work from anywhere and on any device, it also reflects the work-life balance younger workers have come to embrace.

So there are benefits to be had, but again the scale of those benefits will depend on how the organization operates, the percentage of staff involved in these types of collaborative projects, and how effectively IT can shift them to this new way to work.

CONCLUSION- GETTING STARTED

The key question before organizations today is how they should begin moving in this direction. The first step is to determine the percentage of the workforce actually involved in these types of collaborative projects. Certainly, organizations with a high percentage of task workers or service workers are less likely to benefit.

The next step is to meet with the departments or business units engaged in this type of work and discuss the challenges of using email as a collaboration tool, and then describe the capabilities social collaboration platforms and how organizations can use them to increase the efficiency and effectiveness. At this point it is critical to reinforce the need for 100% participation. If you attempt to push this forward with some users still wedded to the email, you are almost guaranteed to fail.

The goal at this stage should be to identify groups to test one or more of the available platforms. If the vendor supplying your PBX or UC&C solution offers one, they should be included in the pilot. The IT department should be one of the pilot groups, as many IT projects are technically involved and highly collaborative. Fortunately, many of the social collaboration platforms offer a bare-bones free version with a fully functional solution available for licensing.

IT should maintain contact with each of the groups conducting a trial to understand user acceptance, problems they encountered, users that refuse to engage and to measure the ongoing effectiveness of the various platforms.

At the end of the pilot, or at some defined point in the process (the actual projects may extend well beyond the planned duration of the pilots) a report should be prepared and reviewed with the relevant managers. That report should include as many quantitative measures as possible, including the impact on the number of emails and the amount of time users are dedicating to email before and after.

Social collaboration platforms hold a tremendous promise for many organizations, and they are an option for any organization that depends on collaborative work should be evaluating. We have seen countless fixed and mobile applications that have revolutionized how tasks are conducted in the consumer sector. Social collaboration is one of the first targeting how businesses can change how they operate. The time to start is now.