



Why UC implementations fail

Here are the top 10 reasons and how to avoid them

Overview

Unified communications (UC) is increasingly viewed as a valuable platform that can offer numerous benefits across the entire enterprise. The technology is expected to play a key role in many organizations' ongoing efforts to grow their business and improve profitability. According to a recent Gartner survey, respondents cited improvements in employee collaboration, productivity and customer service as the top three benefits to deploying a UC solution.¹

While it's widely acknowledged that UC benefits organizations in several ways, such success can be a double-edged sword if systems are implemented incorrectly. UC can expose an organization to unnecessary financial and operational costs. According to a CDW unified communications tracking poll, the most common concerns among organizations planning a UC implementation are how it will affect network security (45 percent of respondents), what it requires in equipment and capital costs (44 percent) and where it will drive operating costs (42 percent).²

UC implementations can fail for many reasons. Lack of communication, misaligned priorities and a failure to understand user needs can cause even the most well-planned implementation to falter. Organizations planning to deploy a UC platform across their enterprise should keep the following pitfalls in mind as they move through the implementation process.

1. Misaligned business requirements — Everything but the kitchen sink

Many UC implementations fail because organizations use the wrong set of business requirements when determining the ultimate solution. What the IT department thought end users wanted and what they actually needed were often two different things. Many organizations find themselves changing mission-critical business processes to align with the functions and features that a UC platform can deliver rather than aligning the UC system with how the business operates and how users will put it to task. Although many of the leading UC platforms offer similar features and functionality, they do so in vastly different ways. These differences need to be taken into account when determining user and business requirements.

2. Understanding end-user capabilities — We needed a sailboat, you gave us a rocket ship

When technology is too complicated or cumbersome for end users to embrace, the result is simple—they don't use it. Technology should be designed to make users' jobs easier, not harder. Just because a UC system has more bells and whistles than users could ever need, such features may not be what they actually want. Understanding what end users will actually use, as well as the limits of their comfort zone, is critical to the successful adoption of UC across the enterprise.

3. Solution sizing — My eyes were bigger than my stomach

How much UC does the organization really need? The short answer is just enough to get the job done. The solution has to align with how the business operates and how UC will be used. UC is an overlay to enterprise organizational processes and is designed to help organizations operate more efficiently and effectively by letting people communicate and exchange information across numerous devices. UC also involves highly complex components and solutions, most of which have a "no return" policy. Organizations should buy only what is immediately required and add on components as needed. The right vendor or partner can help organizations understand what they need and what makes financial and technical sense.

The most efficient and effective way to roll out a UC system is in phases. According to Bob Hersch, Accenture global managing director, "A phased approach to creating a blueprint and executing the plan—combined with sound advice from solutions providers—will bring the best results. The whole implementation process should take anywhere from 15 to 22 months, depending on your network readiness, extent of projects and planning expertise. Move too hastily, however, and your organization may fail to secure enough return on investment and even expose itself to unnecessary risk. The idea is to spend only on the infrastructure and functions that bring value. Unified communications and collaboration solutions therefore should have a tag that reads 'Don't plug this in until you know what's on the other end.'"³

¹"Through 2011, Organizations Will Double Pay for 50 Percent of Communications and Collaboration Software Technologies," Gartner, 2009, pg. 1. Avaya Inc. and Gartner, Inc. are both owned in part by Silver Lake, a leading financial investment firm. Gartner research is produced independently by Gartner analysts, without influence, review or approval of their outside investors or shareholders. For further information on the independence and integrity of Gartner research, see Guiding Principles on Independence and Objectivity on Gartner's website, http://www.gartner.com/it/about/omb_guide.jsp.

²Brian Kopf, "Poll Indicates Implementation of Unified Communications Ongoing Despite Weak Economy," *ComputerUser*, March, 11, 2009.

³Bob Hersch, "How to Adopt Unified Communications and Collaboration," *eWeek.com*, April 10, 2008, pg. 1.



4. Vendor and partner selection — It takes two to tango

Selecting a vendor for its UC implementation is one of the most important decisions an organization will make. Vendors and partners have a tremendous amount of influence on which solution is ultimately implemented. Organizations typically evaluate 2.66 vendors before choosing one. Ideally, they should evaluate four vendors to get a solid assessment before making their final selection.⁴ But, at the end of the day, organizations, not vendors, have to live with the consequences if the implementation isn't successful. Because UC is a complex solution, selected vendors should have deep expertise and be recognized leaders by the manufacturer.

Organizations need to consider their vendor or partner choices carefully, because the end result of that selection could prove vital to the overall success of their UC implementation. According to Info-Tech Research Group, "The fact is that for most enterprises, the selection of the product itself should be secondary to the strength and vision of the vendor, and the knowledge and expertise of the integrator."⁵

5. Wrong platform choice — All that glitters is not gold

A key challenge to deploying a UC system is in limiting the amount of chaos organizations face as they adopt unfamiliar technologies. Elizabeth Herrell, an analyst at Forrester Research Inc., says problem areas include system interoperability, infrastructure readiness and user training. Failing to fully address each of these points, she notes, could lead to crippling enterprise communications failures. "UC adoption is not a single solution but a process," Herrell warns. "Without a clear understanding of how UC benefits the entire user community, many of its benefits may not be achieved."⁶

6. Cost of investment — Champagne taste on a beer budget

While the upfront costs of UC systems may appear manageable and within budget, it is usually the longer-term costs that eventually put a UC project into the red. For example, a UC platform designed for a midsize enterprise with 1,000 users will require 10 servers in a Microsoft environment, five servers with Cisco and two with Avaya—an 80 percent cost difference in hardware alone. Add on the cost of hardware maintenance, system administrators and redundancy needed to keep systems online above the 95 percent required threshold, and an organization could be looking at a sizeable investment long before a single piece of software is installed. Many organizations don't use the full array of features available in the most popular UC platforms, but they still may end up paying licensing costs for features they don't use because of the way manufacturers bundle software licensing in "all or none" packages. Knowing the front-end costs (hardware, software, licensing) as well as the back-end costs (administration, maintenance, service delivery) up-front can go a long way toward understanding the bottom-line costs of a UC implementation.

"...the selection of the product itself should be secondary to the strength and vision of the vendor, and the knowledge and expertise of the integrator."

Info-Tech Research Group

⁴Robin Gareiss, "The True Cost of Voice Over IP," Nemertes Research, 2009, pg. 8.

⁵"On the Ground with IP Telephony: Vendor and Integrator Selection," Info-Tech Research Group, April 19, 2007, pg. 2.

⁶John Edwards, "How to deploy unified communications without tears," *Computerworld*, August 10, 2009, pg. 1.

7. Return on investment — A penny saved is a penny earned

Determining the return on investment (ROI) for UC platforms can be complicated. The metrics and measurements used are often arbitrary because of how the business chooses to measure its UC implementation's expected return. However, ROI can be found in Internet Protocol (IP) transport savings, reduced mobile phone charges, increased employee productivity and cost savings inherent in a modern communications platform. Some metrics are more difficult to measure than others, so organizations need to find those that make the most sense for their business.

8. Total cost of ownership — A fool and his money are soon parted

UC systems are complex environments with complex underlying systems. Many of the costs associated with purchasing, owning and operating a UC platform are unknown until the system goes live and employees begin using it. Today, only a few leading UC vendors—Avaya, Microsoft, Cisco and IBM—offer complete enterprisewide solutions.

Most of the ownership costs are not even discussed during the sales cycle primarily because sales representatives typically don't focus on how IT will support the UC system after implementation. However, organizations with limited IT resources and users who are not technology savvy may quickly discover that their IT department is spending an inordinate amount of time answering questions and teaching users how to navigate the system, all of which add to ownership costs.

9. Change management — Didn't you get the memo?

Many transformational activities fail due to poor change management processes. The speed at which business transformation occurs today demands reliable and well-established change management practices. The right hand needs to know what the left hand is doing if they are going to work together. An effective change management program

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begins with a well-crafted communications strategy. Let everyone know what's going on and when. Provide a clear understanding of the difference between individual and organizational benefits of implementing a UC platform. Who gets what and when is critical when laying out a business outcome road map and deployment schedule. Set expectations regarding what types of changes users and the business should see after the UC platform is rolled out. If people know what to expect, they are more likely to be flexible when things don't go as planned. Provide user training. Users who don't know how to use the new tools will become frustrated, causing adoption to drop, complaints to rise and a less-than-ideal transition to the new UC system.

10. Executive and IT sponsorship — All bark and no bite

A lack of sponsorship is one of the most important reasons why UC implementations fail. The technology could work flawlessly, costs could stay well within budget, delivery could occur on time and as planned, and users may be ecstatic about the system's new features, but if management doesn't like the new platform or IT doesn't support it, the overall perception will be that the project failed to deliver the expected value to the business and its users. Simply installing UC does not mean people will use it—there has to be a mandate from the top that this is the direction the organization is taking and people need to get onboard. Without clear direction, the UC train will fly off the tracks at the first turn around the bend.

Keys to successful implementation

Many considerations must be taken into account before selecting and deploying a UC system of any size. To help ensure a successful UC implementation across the enterprise, organizations need to:

- Consider reaching out to professional services providers for best-in-class support as needed throughout the implementation.
- Develop an in-depth deployment strategy, leaving no stone unturned.
- Understand the level of interoperability with current infrastructure and how applications will be integrated with the new UC platform—systems need to play well together in the same sandbox.
- Know how users and the business will operate the new system. Develop a comprehensive set of business requirements for the entire enterprise. Take advantage of people who clearly understand the new technology, as well as current systems already in place, to reduce the chance of unexpected failures.
- Carefully consider complexity. Don't use it if IT can't understand it. Systems that seem too complex most likely are. If employees can't understand the new platform, they won't use it.
- Deploy components in phases. UC implementations are inherently complex, so plan for at least a 12- to 18-month deployment that occurs in stages.

No two UC implementations are the same and as such there is no single way to successfully deliver a UC platform. However, organizations can eliminate many of the risks typical to most UC implementations by following common-sense guidelines. Organizations that are considering a UC implementation should develop a solid strategy and plan, be methodical and precise in their deployment efforts, and remain patient. Change happens slowly at times but it often turns out to be exactly the kind of change an organization needs to improve operations, reduce costs and remain competitive.

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This point of view was developed by the Avaya Strategic Communications Consulting group.

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