Unified Communications: What Comes Next?

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Thirty years ago, we drove to the office. We made lots of phone calls, had many face-to-face office meetings, and travelled to business conferences in distant cities. We used interoffice memos and the postal service for mail, took phone messages on paper and, if we were in a hurry, we sent a fax. Doing business 30 years ago meant offices and phones, and typewritten memos, but the way we communicate has certainly changed.

The way we process information has also changed dramatically. The Internet offers us instant access to thousands of information sources. If we want to find and purchase supplies, we can do so online and the world is literally our shopping center. We are connected to a global marketplace for business to business (B2B) and business to consumer (B2C) transactions.

Individuals have come to expect freedom of choice in how they communicate, now taking advantage of a communications media menu that includes voice, video, text messages, e-mail, third-party messenger service, and social media.   Individuals also expect that freedom whether they are playing out their role as employees, customers, or suppliers.

Unified communications and collaboration (UC&C) platforms, the Internet, and mobile devices have enabled much of this evolution. But the question still unanswered is "what comes next?" For people, the next step is personalized engagement. For networks, the next transition is to "platform-free" environments.

This advisory will look at how UC&C technology has evolved to enable and benefit employee and team engagement, how contact center technology can enhance loyalty through customer engagement, and how virtual networks can evolve to support ever-changing business and personal needs.

Employee and Team Engagement

As information and communications technology has advanced, employees have learned to expect business tools that are as good as or better than what they can access as consumers. As individuals, some people prefer to use text messaging to communicate, some prefer an "old fashioned" phone call, some prefer to sit down and type out an email. Employees want their choice of these media and more. For example, instant group communications using group messenger services such as Facebook Messenger or Google Hangouts have made it

easy to quickly set up teams that help members engage real-time, either at their desk or on a mobile device. Having a choice of the most efficient (or the most comfortable) communications media improves employee and team productivity.

Video communications has become increasingly important to improve the quality of person-to-person interactions in the face of less travel and a geographically diverse workforce. Seeing someone's reaction and body language, even if on a screen, dramatically increases how well we can communicate with and engage people. When coupled with screen-sharing and desktop collaboration, interactions can be as good as being in the same room, without the time and expense of travel to another face-to-face meeting.

Employee mobility is also a benefit that more businesses deem as critical. A recent Webtorials survey found that over three-quarters of IT professionals believe that support for enterprise mobility was important to their organization. More employees today are able to work away from the office than ever before, enabled by mobile devices, high-speed mobile networks, mobility apps, and business networks or cloud-based services that offer secure remote access. Presence management is also a big part of enabling mobility, both in and out of the office. UC systems offer the ability for co-workers to see who is at their desk, who is available in and out of the office, and who is not available. The result: even if employees are away from their desk or the office, they can still get the information they need to do business, and engage with individual colleagues and with teams.

Still, employee engagement needs more than just an underlying platform that supports UC&C. To create an environment of engagement, the business culture and the business processes need to enable the ability to build person-to-person relationships. This can be a tricky thing to do when employees are not physically together. However, the payoff is huge for employers who can create an environment that allows employees to comfortably work from any location, yet still sustain strong interpersonal personal and group communications and collaboration. Teams that can engage together will show notable productivity gains, increased individual loyalty toward the organization, and can even show improvement in innovation – provided that the organization focuses on how to maximize the benefits of a fully-featured collaboration platform.

Customer Engagement

Just like employees have come to expect communications options at work, customers have come to expect a personal choice of contact options. Consequently, what was yesterday's "call center" is today's contact center, supporting incoming and outgoing voice calls, e-mails, text messages, tweets, and other social media messages. Customers want a choice of phone-based and online self-service options, and some may prefer to see who they are talking to.

Customers have also become increasingly demanding. For example, customers *don't* want to have their call transferred, they *don't* want to repeat their name and account number that they just gave to the IVR, and they *don't* want to wait for the customer service agent to go

find someone who can answer their question. They *do* want first call resolution, they *do* expect that a business knows who they are and what they want, and they *do* want to reach the right person to immediately address their concern.

Ideally, customers want a business to be proactive in reaching out, again using the customer's preferred media for interaction. For example, airlines get high marks for giving flyers the choice to receive a text, e-mail or voice message to advise a traveler of schedule updates, based on the traveler's profile. However, airlines are also notorious for limited and delayed access when lodging a complaint. The proactive approach can engender customer loyalty, and the opposite is true when organizations make it difficult for their customers to interact.

Another change over the past decade is how customers communicate between themselves about good (or bad) customer service. In the past, business could thrive or die based on "word of mouth" advertising. The "megaphone" of social media services like Facebook and Twitter has given customers a new force that instantly amplifies the customer experience — giving companies even more reason to provide top-rate customer interactions. Social media can be also be a tool to engage the customer, both as a proactive force (e.g. like us on Facebook, contact us via Twitter.) However, customer engagements via social media need prompt attention and must be managed accordingly.

As with unified communications platforms that must be empowered by a business culture that enables employee and team engagement, so too must contact center strategies put processes and resources in place to engage their customers. We all know that an engaged customer is a loyal customer, and that the world is our marketplace. Organizations need to lay out and enact a strategy that takes full advantage of the features available with today's contact center platforms to fully engage their customers.

Network Infrastructure

Enterprise and service provider networks have seen revolutionary shifts in the past decade, first moving from purpose-built switches to multi-purpose servers, then transitioning to "platform-free" virtual devices. IT managers also have a range of cloud-based services to choose from, including private cloud, public cloud, and a hybrid mix of both public and private options.

These architectures have evolved because they offer cheaper hardware (by using off the shelf servers). More importantly, using software defined networks (SDNs) for a wide variety of applications and content allows the mix and match of the apps to change as quickly as the needs of the business change. Flexibility even extends to application and device awareness, so employees and customers can choose their preferred endpoint on a per-transaction basis. Cloud-based services, whether public or private, enable equal access from the campus and to remote locations.

Although networks continue to evolve into platform-agnostic applications, some network characteristics are still required — including security, quality of service features, reporting, and network management tools. In fact, the need to meet these fundamental networking requirements is an even bigger imperative when moving to virtual and cloud-based platforms.

Conclusions: It's the people *and* the platform

The evolution of unified communications and contact center platforms have been dramatic, as has been the shift to SDNs. However, just like a stack of power tools, concrete, and lumber do not create a new house, the latest collaboration tools and network platforms need a well-designed architectural plan and skilled laborers to build something useful. In short, buying the tools isn't enough — managers need to create well designed business processes and enable a supportive culture that encourages interpersonal relationships if they want to move beyond the platforms to employee and customer engagement.

About the Sponsor

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About Larry Hettick

Larry is the Editorial Director and a Senior Research Fellow at Webtorials. A thirty-year telecom veteran who has managed products for service providers and infrastructure supplies, he has provided industry analysis focusing on Unified Communications for the last 15 years. Before joining Webtorials, he spent a decade working with Current Analysis, where he remains a contributing analyst. Hettick also authors Network World's bi-weekly VoIP and Convergence Newsletter.

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