

# Pipeline

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## ***So What's the Big Deal About UC?***

By Peter Gilligan

Unified Communications (UC) has been around for some years now. When you strip away the hype, isn't it just about linking all the communications services already out there? So it's no big deal... right?

The answer to that question is not so straightforward. Before we get into that, I would like to put forward my definition of UC. It is important to do this, as several definitions exist and it is easy to get into a conversation on UC and discover you are talking about different things. In my mind, UC is the convergence of my many communications services onto my modest number of communications devices. To make this very clear, I am talking about:

- Voice calls (fixed & mobile)
- Voicemail
- Conference Calls
- Email
- Instant Messaging (IM)
- Video Conferencing
- Presence

All being delivered to my device of choice: my PC, hand held, or phone.



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From an end-user perspective, the cool thing about UC is that it provides the freedom to move about while being as connected as we would be if we were in the office. On second thought, maybe that's not so cool! I guess we could always turn our devices off... but we don't. From an enterprise perspective, the productivity benefits derived from this new level of accessibility may be useful, but are there financial benefits to UC? There could be. It depends on your current voice setup. If your enterprise is using traditional voice services connected through a number of geographically distributed PBXs, there is the potential to save some real money. Converting your telephony to IP and utilizing soft-phones rather than desk handsets removes the cost of PBX maintenance, the E1/T1s that service those PBXs, plus the cost of all those desk phones. This can be a significant amount of money. Of course, against those savings you need to offset the cost of additional bandwidth required to support your voice traffic and additional equipment to manage that traffic, plus the implementation & ongoing support costs. You guessed it: there is a business case required here, but you may be surprised at how much you could save. For large organizations, the savings can be in the millions.

So the upside is some cool productivity gains and some real money savings. But is there a downside? Well, yes. There are some things that will make you wince. To state the obvious, soft phones rely on your PC being up. That means you can't walk into the office, pick up the phone and make a call. You have to boot up first (and if you are a laptop user like me that can be a time consuming pain), but you can use your handheld until you are online, so this isn't a killer.



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Quality of service can be an issue, especially if you or your employees are working away from the corporate network. This can introduce issues generated by poor provider or home networks but probably no worse than your current situation. There may be a need to change phone numbers. Again, this is a pain but can be dealt with. The bottom line is that if the financial case and the productivity benefits offset the negatives, you are a candidate for UC.

The next question is what to buy and how to install and migrate to it. These are great questions but would require a whole separate article to discuss, and what I

would like to focus on here is a question I bumped into while working on a large UC deployment recently: how will UC affect my day-to-day operations?

Those of us who have been doing this for a while know that when entering a project like UC, it is all about standing up the technology and getting the users onto the new platform. In the back of our minds, we know that someone will need to look after it in production but those thoughts are secondary to the fun of opening the box, putting the pieces together, and seeing how it works. My role on this project was to look at how support of the UC platform would be transitioned from the development team to "business as usual" operations. Naturally, a dedicated deployment team had been established, and at the time of my arrival this team was supporting a 200-person pilot. The migration plan had UC being deployed to 40,000+ internal users over 3 years (or better) starting now! A representative from the Help Desk had been embedded in the team. His job was to understand the technology, develop troubleshooting skills, and seed that knowledge back into the broader Help Desk team. An excellent start, but not nearly enough to support a rollout of this size. It was clear that the development team was not in a position to support the platform as the migration quickly gained momentum. Sure they could support the 200 pilot users, maybe even the first 2,000, but after that they would be swamped. UC needed to be "Operationalized."

Before getting into what that entails, I'd like to share some observations from the early days of this project. My background is Telco Operations plus IT. It was clear to me, and to the development team, that the hard part of UC is the voice services. Email and IM, even video, are in the comfort zone of IT departments. They have been managing these services for years and are generally good at it. Voice is a different story - especially if VoIP is not broadly deployed in your organization. Voice services are the ultimate real time application. There is no "I'll slow this down" or "I'll send it later." Voice packets cannot be reassembled later without introducing very noticeable delays that just won't do. People expect instant service, five 9s reliability, and high quality. Meeting the expectations associated with voice communications is a new experience for many IT departments. Are they ready? I suspect not. It also struck me that what I was seeing was a merging of telco operations and IT operations, for real. Now this may not be a revelation to you and I know the TMForum and ITIL standards are converging, but the deployment of UC brought it home to me in a very real sense. IT had become the phone company!

Anyway, back to Operationalization.....

For me Operationalization is the task of moving an application from development into "business-as-usual" mode. This requires an impact analysis to be performed on the processes, systems, and support organizations involved. It's best to do this using a standard, structured industry framework. The obvious choice was ITIL, but given that UC is all about communications services, I decided to use eTOM. Now eTOM is a fine model but you could spend a lifetime and a small fortune driving all those processes in the Operations area alone to level 4, where it needs to be in the day-to-day world. It is nearly impossible to argue with budget-focused IT managers that there is value in doing that. I've found that a more pragmatic approach is to take the processes vital for Day 1 operations success and focus on those. The remaining processes can be built out as the organization matures. The Operations processes to focus on are:

### **In CRM**

- Order/Request Handling
- Problem Handling

### **In Service Management & Operation (SM&O)**

- Service Configuration & Activation
- Service Problem Management

### **In Resource Management & Operation (RM&O)**

- Resource Trouble Management

These processes define how to add, change, and delete UC Services. They also map out how to provision and fix them. The great thing about processes is they also tell you who does each task plus the support systems used, all very useful input to an impact analysis. Communications is always a problem in organizations and this project was no different. The development team had been beavering away in virtual isolation. The rest of the company had heard vague rumors of UC but the details were sketchy. Time for some process definition workshops! There is nothing better than a good Process Workshop to open communications channels between groups and to stimulate thought. They clarify workflow, establish task responsibilities, bring issues to the surface and get people involved. (But keep the number of workshops to a minimum or they will become tedious and viewed as time wasters.) Two to four well prepared workshops of 2 to 3 hours can achieve great things. In the three workshops I ran, we covered:

- Ordering
- Provisioning
- Logistics
- Network Planning & Engineering
- Help Desk
- Fault Restoration
- Performance Monitoring and
- The Support Systems for all of the above.

For me, the most interesting processes were Problem & Trouble Management. As the development team PM said, "Unify your communications and unify your problems." Understanding how to troubleshoot and repair these services, where the reported problem may only be a symptom of the underlying cause, is a challenge - especially where Voice is just another application running on the network. It is fair to say that the tools available to help out here are under-developed, but they will mature as the number of UC deployments grow.

The Systems impact assessment was also interesting. Sixteen affected systems were identified through the workshops and interviews. Only four systems had some work underway. That left twelve systems completely out of the project, although each required enhancements to be specified, built, and deployed. Not huge amounts of work required here but sufficient to warrant a budget being calculated and allocated. Obviously, this cost didn't make it into the business case. Failure to identify, prioritize, and get the changes into the development schedules for these systems was definitely going to cause problems in the rollout and user experience.

Organization optimization analysis is certainly called for when collapsing IT and Voice Support, but I would leave that for later, unless you come across issues that are going to greatly impede the rollout and support of UC. People tend to get concerned-- even threatened-- when you mention re-organization. Optimizing your support organization can happen as part of your ongoing productivity improvements. The obvious and suggested change is to merge your messaging and voice support groups within IT. Again, voice is now just another app on the network. How you do this depends largely on the individuals in the teams, but multi-skilling and cross-skilling is definitely the name of the game.

So what messages should you take away from my experience? Unified Communications is inevitable. VoIP will become the pervasive technology for voice communications. UC brings all the communications apps under the one banner. You will evolve into it anyway. Early adoption can deliver significant financial benefits, but these need to be weighed against the immaturity of the available support tools. My suggestion is to look at it now, and seriously. If you decide to go for it, remember to budget and plan for Operationalization. It's the details that will make or break your implementation. You don't want to mess with people's phone calls. They get angry. Be thorough and take care!

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