STRATEGIC POSITIONING WITH UNIFIED COMMUNICATIONS

Hosted voice services deliver competitive advantage for market-driven companies

An effective communications strategy has always been foundational to market success. Yet in today’s business climate, companies are challenged to stay one step ahead of the rapidly evolving technology needed to carry out their strategy.

Companies on a rapid growth trajectory need flexible, cost-efficient options to address their present and future communications strategy. As technological innovation continues to accelerate the speed at which business is conducted, companies must continuously evaluate and optimize their communications systems. It is a time consuming and costly prospect for most.

“A number of market factors contribute to the complexities businesses face with their communications strategies,” said Craig Cowden, senior vice president, Enterprise Solutions and Network Engineering & Operations at Bright House Networks. “The increase in merger and acquisition activity over the past decade has resulted in parent companies absorbing and struggling to integrate disparate communications infrastructures. These platforms must often be managed separately due to integration issues, an obviously costly and suboptimal outcome.”

The rise of e-commerce and social media, coupled with an increasingly global workforce, has also contributed to the need for a variety of communications systems, requiring a much broader implementation focus than just traditional telephony. Companies now must have strategies for video, audio conferencing and other collaboration solutions. Reinforcing all of these complexities is rapid uptake and use of mobile devices.

As companies consider how to successfully navigate the future communications landscape, the ability to provide seamless collaboration across voice and data platforms will be critical. Often this effort equates to heavy loads placed on internal IT resources and hefty budgets to continually invest in new technology. For the average lean IT department of today, it can be a recipe for failure.

For these reasons, many companies are realizing the advantages of moving to a unified communications (UC) platform where data and voice networks are converged to streamline administration. UC platforms also eliminate ongoing costly network maintenance by moving the solution to the cloud.

“The biggest change we’re seeing in unified communication deployments is the adoption of video,” says Diane Myers, principal analyst for voice over Internet protocol (VOIP), UC and IP multimedia subsystem at market research firm Infonetics Research. “Businesses have been implementing more mobility into their UC architectures over the past year and now are looking toward videoconferencing to help drive further productivity.”

A 2013 survey by Infonetics reveals that when companies adopt UC, they experience improved response times, increased employee productivity, and reduced operational costs.\(^1\) In fact, of firms using UC, more than 60 percent report savings of three hours per week per mobile worker.\(^2\)

Another notable industry trend is the move toward cloud deployments of UC. Twenty-two percent of respondents to a 2013 survey indicate that they have already implemented portions of their UC architecture in a private cloud, and 19 percent have done so in a public cloud.\(^3\)

While UC, and notably UC deployments within cloud-based environments, provide cost-efficient infrastructures to support advanced communication strategies, ongoing management of these systems is still a complex venture for most IT
As a result, many companies are turning to outsourced UC management as the most cost-efficient option. “Managing the complex communications infrastructure of today’s enterprise requires dedicated staff and priority focus. Most IT departments are simply not equipped to monitor and manage this critical area with the dedication required to stay on the cutting edge,” says Enterprise Solutions’ Cowden. “We understand this challenge and have responded by collaboratively building an advanced hosted voice solution that leverages the benefits of a cloud platform and delivers a state-of-the-art UC system.”

Consider that Infonetics Research’s latest *VOIP and UC Services and Subscribers* report reveals that hosted private branch exchange (PBX)/UC grew the most of any VOIP service in the first half of 2013. This is likely because businesses, particularly larger enterprises, are increasingly finding that hosted services are a viable alternative to premises-based solutions.

In tandem with this trend, hosted cloud-based call center support is also poised for expansion, with research revealing growth of 80 percent in 2011 alone. The movement began when companies were faced with uncertainty during the recession and shied away from large infrastructure investments. Many turned to cloud-based solutions and later realized the overarching benefits of hosted cloud environments: minimal upfront investment, improved functionality, high reliability, a dedicated support partner and end user ease of use.

Projections are that cloud-based contact center infrastructure markets will grow in the 22–30 percent range between 2013 and 2015.

**HOSTED VOICE OVERCOMES TECHNOLOGY, MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES**

Over the past decade, healthcare management company MED3000 has experienced rapid growth and strategically completed a number of telecommunication company acquisitions to best position itself in the market. The momentum proved positive to the company’s bottom line but also created a challenging communications front as the accelerated expansion brought with it a variety of communication platforms.

Now under the McKesson brand portfolio, Pittsburgh-based MED3000 offers expanded capabilities to help customers successfully address growing healthcare complexity and achieve their full potential as part of McKesson’s Better Health 2020 strategy. Its 18 operation centers across the United States deliver accessible, affordable healthcare management and technology services—including full practice management, provider network operations, revenue cycle management, network management and third-party administration—to physicians, hospitals, health systems, independent practice association network management organizations and fire/EMS departments.

Today, these operation centers are networked to provide clients with access to the full scope of MED3000 tools, expertise and services with the security of a national support structure. But that has not always been the case; previously each office operated as an independent silo from a communications perspective.

“Each site was operating with its own communications platform, with some providing more services than others. Keeping up with the number of vendors and services being used was a huge challenge, as was managing costs and technologies associated with each,” says Nick Miller, director of technical operations for Business Performance Service, MED3000. “Ongoing management and maintenance of this one area was a constant drain on our IT resources.”

The company identified the need for UC infrastructure to better manage costs and extend next-generation capabilities across the organization. Initial considerations included plans to utilize internal resources to conduct the UC transition and provide for ongoing management. But after extensive analysis, the MED3000 team determined that the cost of an internal strategy proved too expensive.
“We did not have the experience and skill set in-house to properly maintain our phone systems or to standardize our workflow and functionality across the organization,” says Miller. “It made sense for us to look to outsourcing.”

The solution came in the form of session initiation protocol (SIP) trunking, hosted voice, and call-center solutions through Bright House Networks. The company’s solution delivers a heterogeneous communications platform across all locations within MED3000, providing a standard infrastructure. By leveraging the flexible pay-as-you-grow model, MED3000 is able to build a cost-effective communications strategy into its growth initiatives with minimal upfront investment.

Deployment was not without challenges. In particular, individual sites had unique operational and technical requirements based on the services provided. This was especially true for individual call centers.

“Each site required a detailed workflow analysis to map out call flows and design the system accordingly. This was then presented to managers of each operations center to help them understand how the new platform would work,” says Miller. “Bright House rose to the challenge, taking a consultative approach that instilled in our managers the confidence that the company understood and could address their specific requirements and that they would be there when [the centers] needed them.”

Among the key benefits MED3000 has realized from its state-of-the-art, expertly managed UC platform is the flexibility to scale resources based on call volume, including the ability to shift overflow to another operations center during peak hours. Enabling a remote workforce and the ability to incorporate technology into business continuity planning were also made possible through its relationship with Bright House.

“Since eliminating the obstacles created by disparate systems, we’ve been able to cross-breed ideas internally to generate best practices and improve business processes. When we need to, we can lean on Bright House to fill the gaps in expertise.”

Nick Miller, Director
Technical Operations, Business Performance Service
MED3000

House’s ability to bring the technical and business sides of our operations together.”

BEST PRACTICES FOR CHOOSING A PROVIDER

High growth in hosted UC lends to high growth in vendor companies seeking to enter the market and capture market share. Businesses seeking to leverage the benefits associated with hosted UC platforms should consider a number of best practices for choosing a provider that will meet current needs and best position them for future growth.

The availability of end-to-end network monitoring and management is critical. When performance results rest with one vendor, there is no question or confusion about accountability for every aspect of the network. Vendors that own and operate not only the cloud’s equipment but also the fiber infrastructure connecting the sites have more control over quality, responsiveness and the ability to stay on the cutting edge.

Network security is a make-or-break element. No company wants to be in tomorrow’s headlines for a security breach, so a hosted UC service’s ability to provide secure network traffic across other networks should be foundational to vendor choice.

Real-time monitoring, as well as the provision of regular and thorough reports, ensures that a company investing in hosted UC is always aware of network performance. Leading industry certifications and partnerships will suggest that a vendor is respected in the IT community. Vendors should also be able to provide documented policies for use of industry best practices based on the standards of the Information Technology Infrastructure Library.

CONCLUSION

Communications strategies must position companies for future expectations of the marketplace. Companies must be forward-looking and creative with their strategies to stay one step ahead of technology and optimize costs.
To address the need for seamless collaboration across voice and data platforms, and systems and devices, many companies are turning to hosted UC platforms as the most cost-efficient alternative. As demonstrated by MED3000’s experience with Bright House Networks, outsourcing complex management and maintenance of communications needs frees up critical IT resources to focus on higher-level strategic initiatives that ensure long-term success.

The key is to seek out those vendors who are highly qualified and possess a proven track record of delivering secure, flexible and scalable solutions, as well as end-to-end network monitoring and management.

Concludes Infonetics’ Myers: “Vendors that can effectively deliver integrated video and mobility into their UC solution and do so in a simple and easy-to-use manner will be best positioned for success.”


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