On UC, the channel has m

The job of the channel is to encourage greater adoption of Unified Communications in the market. Big strides have been taken in this direction, but does the channel's ability to truly maximise on UC potential match the size of the opportunity?

The story of UC is one of the most exhilarating in the history of modern business communications. It has changed everything and created a land of opportunity for the channel. Yet the strength of UC lies not in the solution nor its delivery as such, but in how it is adopted by users, in their desire to collaborate and use the technology as a place of congregation, combining various channels into an all encompassing collaborative hub. UC is, after all, for everyone, and should ideally create a sense of place for disparate office and mobile workers. But how many UC deployments lie virtually unused across the land?

UC's biggest handicap is simple – not enough people are using it, which can only constrain its effectiveness in delivering RoI to the customer. "Making UC

Adrian Hipkiss

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work for a business requires more than just delivering a solution," said Rob Keenan, Head of Portfolio Management UK at Unify. "It requires a cultural change. Individuals need to understand how UC can help with real life business situations. Focusing on the technology will lead to failure, so concentrate instead on business challenges and, even more importantly, people."

True adoption is a big challenge. Many organisations plan to install a full UC suite but end up with basic voice functions and a plan to 'do it later'. "However, this is an opportunity for resellers to show customers how UC can benefit them in simple ways, enabling users to understand how the technology is a must-have, not a nice-to-have," added Keenan. "How UC is implemented and adopted must be determined by the customer, therefore knowledge about their requirements is a must."

In the early days of UC it ranked as an over-hyped innovation, but now it has found a firm place in the mid-market especially, observed Adrian Hipkiss, Managing Director EMEA, ShoreTel. "The mid-market is the sweet spot where we see the greatest potential for growth," he stated. "The channel is ideally positioned to help organisations of this size. Mid-market businesses

Rob Keenan

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need more flexible, easy to use communications systems because this aligns with how they must be super-responsive to dynamic markets. While being able to collaborate with colleagues and interact with customers has become ever more critical, the systems to support this are too often fragmented and difficult to integrate. Customers want communications that are simple, require no special talent to use and can support staff and serve customers across multiple communications modes."

Mainstream

According to analyst firm IDC, 55 per cent of mid-sized companies plan to deploy some form of UC over the next 12 months. This proves that UC has entered the mainstream, and it is no accident that the rise of

UC has a similar trajectory to that of increasing levels of workplace mobility. "It's now become the norm for workers to operate from the best location that suits their work on any given day, whether that be from a client's office, on the move or at home," said Jon Seddon, Head of Product Management, GCI. "UC ties this all together and means people can collaborate with their colleagues and clients seamlessly from wherever they are. Modern working and UC go hand in hand."

He also believes that the biggest opportunity for UC is in the mid-market where businesses are trying to shrink their office footprint while reducing travel time and increasing collaboration and productivity among their employees. Therefore a UC solution and a business's

operational strategy should share the same identity and be reflected in the planning stages of devising a solution. In terms of setting and driving a UC strategy, there are two main challenges, pointed out Seddon.

"Firstly, integration with existing solutions," he explained. "Few customer sites are greenfield nor do they want to rip-and-replace what they have already, so in our view a UC partner needs extensive experience in making the old and the new work together until the customer can fully migrate. The second challenge is adoption. Ditching the desk phone is not for everyone, so a trusted partner will work with the customer to discover which end points will drive the quickest adoption and provide both on-premise and remote training in those critical early days."

Regardless of whether customers choose on-premise or cloud-based UC, providers should offer a full set of design workshops to capture their requirements and tailor the solution to meet their needs. "It's then important to work collaboratively during the roll out and be on hand to drive adoption," added Seddon.

Each individual business is unique. It therefore follows that the applications and components encompassed by UC will differ on a company by company

much to cheer and go for

level, based upon what is relevant and useful to a particular organisation. This means that UC will be the interaction of some, or all of the following applications – voice, workforce mobility, messaging, analytics, conferencing, presence and IT convergence. "Workforce mobility, business analytics and call recording are all key drivers for sales of our UC platforms," said Robin Hayman, Director of Marketing and Product Management, SpliceCom. "And coming back to basics, answering phone calls is still a business critical requirement for most businesses."

Strategic alignment
UC is best delivered when aligned with the customer's existing IT strategy, be that cloud, on-premise or any blend of the two. "A customer's strategy will ultimately dictate where IT and voice applications reside," added Hayman. "At present, the immediate future looks cloud shaped."

In assessing UC delivered cloud solutions, Steve Tutt, Marketing Director at VanillaIP, believes that we have past the early adopter stage. "Packages in the channel are becoming more advanced with resellers increasingly offering bespoke solutions rather than 'one size fits all'," he stated. "Importantly, customers are becoming more sophisticated. They understand the cloud and what it can do for their business."

Hipkiss also reckons that the industry has reached a significant turning point where UC is moving into the cloud and becoming

Steve Tutt

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a service. "There is little holding back this movement as business models are changing in ways that make cloud-based IT a prerequisite for doing business successfully," he said. "There are some challenges that need to be addressed over security concerns, legacy app integrations and ensuring there is the infrastructure to assure a high quality of connectivity, but the opportunity for the channel is transformative. As a trusted technology partner, they can help their customers move communications into the cloud, while simultaneously transforming their own business model to become a UC cloud practice and service provider."

ShoreTel recently conducted a survey of British businesses and uncovered a strong trend towards the cloud. Over half of the respondents are already using cloud-based communications services, and 38 per cent plan to migrate to UC in the cloud soon. "Cloud delivery of unified communications sits neatly alongside how customers are now consuming information technology

and communications as a service," noted Hipkiss.

Today, the UK operates in a global, digital economy where important work gets done wherever and whenever. Without UC this just isn't possible, a factor that is reflected in the results of ShoreTel's survey. Unify's Keenan also observes that the first wave of UC products have matured in the digital world. "We are now seeing a new generation of social collaboration tools take UC to the next level," he commented. "Cloud is of huge interest, but one of the biggest shifts in UC has been the adoption of pay-as-you-go models. This makes the first step to using UC much more palatable and ensures a company feels in control of its communications."

For the enterprise, UC means system integration. But for smaller businesses the service element makes this approach largely cost prohibitive. Ultimately, for smaller firms it's their key business applications that need to be integrated with voice. That usually means Skype for Business, Outlook

and Office in a Microsoft environment. "Using alternative email applications, contact databases and presence detection etc, even if they can be easily deployed and work together in a far more integrated way, just isn't an option," said Hayman. "Smaller businesses require the same best-of-breed approach towards applications as taken by larger organisations, but the integration needs to be made easier. The transition to cloud-based applications has been a great help to UC here."

For many companies, voice is still important, but when you include features that are integral to everyday business – such as conferencing or a one number service – it's clear just how important UC has become. "It is key that organisations get the solution they need," urged Keenan. "This means they have to understand the problem they wish to solve, not just adopt UC and hope it fits. A clear plan and an end objective is crucial."

ShoreTel's research also underlined the important role of the channel in

Jon Seddon

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helping organisations to plan their transition to UC in the cloud. "Our research shows that customers who are considering UC cloud value the support of their independent technology partner," noted Hipkiss. "As the business models of customers change, it is natural that the business model of the channels is also transformed. They become more service-centric and need to consider new skills and capabilities to market themselves and sustain their edge as a cloud service provider."

The key is to have a multi-channel UC solution where, if the phone stops ringing, the business is still operational. "The days of the telecoms system being a closed environment are probably over and integrations with CRM and other workplace systems are an opportunity for the channel to deploy smarter, higher value solutions for customers," said Tutt.

"Another interesting trend is the changing nature of competition in the comms market. We live in a world where car manufacturers see Apple as a potential threat, which seems crazy. For so long we have watched established PBX vendors offer similar products and resellers compete directly with each other. Now, there are many more competitors going direct and bypassing the channel altogether. It will be interesting to see how this space evolves and what approach Google and Facebook among others will take. One thing is certain, constant product development and evolution is essential to staying viable and competitive in this market." ■