

Communications Transformation

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If anyone doubted it before, there is increasing evidence that we have transitioned into a new era of communications. And this isn't VoIP and IPT, which is mostly just a shift in the underlying transport capabilities.

What's coming are the cascading effects of transforming the industry from being largely vertically integrated within one supplier's products into a horizontally layered, standards-based, increasingly-open environment where system components, operating systems, and applications programs may all come from different specialized companies. The trend to standard hardware is well underway. Emerging concepts and capabilities of unified communications will extend that trend to how communications applications are developed and implemented throughout enterprises of all sizes and types.

The data processing industry went through a similar transformation three to four decades ago. The resulting explosion of creativity in applications programming fundamentally altered business activities in virtually every enterprise on the planet. The communications industry will be undergoing the same sort of seismic shift.

We see clearly that this new era in communications will be characterized by an emerging ecosystem of application developers, partners, and systems integrators. Access to SDKs, APIs, GUIs, and toolkits, all linked to evolving capabilities within suppliers' solutions, will increasingly enable third-party developers, in-house experts, and the solutions providers themselves to create applications programs with embedded communications functionality. Thousands of specialized communications-enabled programs will be designed for specific industries' needs or created to solve particular challenges. Some of these will be communications-focused. Others will simply be better ways to address everyday business issues by incorporating communications functionality.

The ability to embed communications software into business processes, applications, and workflow programs will transform how an enterprise's work gets done. The result will be to eliminate communications bottlenecks, speed business activities, and improve productivity to offset staff reductions in these troubled economic times. In many cases, there will also be good opportunities to reduce capital expenditures and operating costs.

These capabilities support the long-standing definition of UC developed by the UCStrategies.com founders – "Communications integrated to optimize business processes." In particular, the embedding of UC capabilities into business applications and processes supports the UC-B (unified communications for business process) use cases where enterprises can gain the greatest value from implementation.

There was interesting evidence supporting this vision of change at the recent VoiceCon Orlando. I feel that the most interesting keynote presentations came from Microsoft and IBM. Gurdeep Singh Pall from Microsoft started things out with a video that envisioned a variety of new communications capabilities. Although some seemed fanciful, he assured us that all of these were in development in Microsoft's labs or in those of other companies.

There were also senior executives from well-known enterprises discussing their deployment of UC capabilities through OCS. What I found especially interesting, though, was when Gurdeep turned to a much more mundane device -- the operator console. Microsoft has re-imagined how the console should work and incorporate UC capabilities. The demonstration showed the power of a software-based approach to console design over traditional models currently on the market.

IBM's Bob Picciano was joined by Ron and Conrad to demonstrate new ways to bring real innovation to everyday business issues. IBM has created a comprehensive toolkit to enable business managers and knowledge workers to create ad hoc dashboards. There were numerous demonstrations, including the ability to create a mashup linking together information from corporate databases, Internet feeds, personal lists, and other sources. This dashboard would be available to, for example, gather and display current financial information about a company when you access a contact from that company, or pinpoint the location on a map of the delivery truck with the contact's order. Ron created an example of such a mashup in about a minute – pulling together and displaying information typically scattered across a number of public and private sources. Moreover, IBM's innovative work in social networking tools creates new information sources and provides innovative collaboration capabilities. And, IBM firmed up a July date for availability of Sametime Unified Telephony (SUT), their product for extending their UC capabilities to most installed voice communications environments.

The legacy voice communications equipment suppliers showed new concepts, too. Avaya announced Aura, a SIP-based, simplified, and highly-scalable unified architecture based on IMS concepts but designed for the enterprise. Avaya joins Siemens and Nortel who earlier have deployed solutions with similar but perhaps less ambitious goals. In addition, Siemens tapped into an emerging buzzword at this conference – cloud computing. They announced a proof-of-concept trial of its UC capabilities running on Amazon's virtual servers to provide UC as a service in the future. They join UC services from IBM's LotusLive and Cisco's WebEx Connect.

While there were good demonstrations and excellent case studies from many companies, I am especially drawn to the strides that the non-legacy suppliers are making. They are fundamentally re-imagining existing capabilities, and doing creative, out-of-the-box thinking about how communications could work. Certainly, these new suppliers don't replicate all the bells and whistles of the existing legacy products. But, that's a classic innovative disruption approach – create a solution that doesn't meet all the traditional functionality, but one that extends capabilities in a new direction, and thereby opening up and capturing new markets.

All of this points to the opening of a new era in how we think about communications. Managers in enterprises, now battered by economy-driven business imperatives, may not be quick to invest in these new capabilities yet. But they should start now to understand the dramatic implications these changes hold for their businesses. The resulting impacts will be similar to those of the data processing revolution three decades ago. Get ready.