

Unified Communications underpins an agile workforce



Executive Summary

Success demands an agile and responsive workforce, regardless of where they are and how they are connected. Enabling mobility is a key factor in this equation, but it is only part of a journey that is really about rallying people, knowledge and resources to improve the organisation's outcomes.

Beyond mobility, the bigger picture is unifying workforce communications at the desk, in the corridor or on the road and providing a platform that allows the business to embrace new processes when the time is right.

This whitepaper outlines the key benefits of unifying communications, SMB and SME communications challenges and how an organisation can steer itself towards a lower cost path that enables it to deliver outstanding service.

The Business edge: responsiveness and trust

Responsiveness and trust are critical to the success of business in a competitive market. Regardless of the organisation's size and physical distribution, the right people need to respond at the right time, whether it's a client query, a new tender, a patient emergency or a critical supply chain issue.

Communications is the cornerstone to agility and responsiveness, but creating the environment for this to occur depends entirely on knowledge. After all, your workforce cannot respond to an event until they are aware of it. And how they respond to threats and opportunities defines both operational performance and the customer experience.

Businesses face resource constraints, which can encourage the view that if the system is not broken, why fix it. But to make an educated decision requires an understanding of how implementing change or avoiding it impacts the business. Above all, an organisation should not sacrifice its advantages over bigger and better resourced competitors.

For many, these advantages are agility, customer service and the people inside the organisation that drive innovation.

Underpinning these hard won assets is the infrastructure that supports an agile workforce. When it comes to telephony, simply providing a dial-tone provides the bare essentials, but are there better ways to support agility? Does a dial-tone place the organisation in the best position to adapt when the time is right?

To make this decision, it is vital to have visibility over the workforce. For example, knowing when an important incoming call was missed and how long did it take for the query to be resolved. Was it one hour? Eight hours? 24 hours?

Was the call critical and what resources were available at the time? Could knowing a person's status have quickly resolved the issue by re-directing the query to the person's mobile or to an equivalently equipped colleague?

This level of detail is available today and it is a highly valued asset to those that do have that visibility and control, but one that may not be missed by those that are satisfied with dial-tone only.

There are no rewards for sacrificing your organisation's ability to stay informed and take action, but the penalties will eventually be relayed back into the organisation through a degradation of the customer's experience.

The customer's perception of dealing with your organisation after all will define the level of trust placed in your workforce. Small overheads on performance, over time, have a cumulative effect that impacts both the top and bottom line.

Unified Communications: the journey to mobility

Today's workforce has a host of communications tools to support business, including desktop telephony, email, instant messaging, presence, social networking, and mobile devices, such as laptops, smartphones or tablets.

The common thread between all these platforms is that they keep people in touch and up to date. Unified Communications offers business a stepping stone to allow its workforce to take control over these tools, manage customer expectations and foster agility.

In its simplest form, Unified Communications gives your workforce the toolset to take action whenever and wherever they are, without overhauling existing business processes.

Enabling mobility is high on many agendas, but it is a capability best measured by degrees, depending on the breadth and depth of mobility the business needs. It could include providing the ability for staff to work from home, routing calls through the PBX to a smartphone, or rules-based integration of business systems with a mobile smartphone device.

Unified Communications is one important step in enabling business to control the degree of mobility by putting components of the office at the mobile worker's fingertips. More importantly, it binds existing processes to the individual, their current activity and environment, rather than their desktops, providing a path to gradually transform practices.

From a technology perspective this means for example, synchronising Outlook calendars to enable staff to set call-handling modes by availability, integrating Microsoft Exchange Active Directory, synchronising Outlook contact information to streamline access to the right people, and providing a simple application to set a call-forwarding state whether staff are at the desk or roaming. Similar functionality can be provided through integration to other presence engines such as Lotus etc.

Mobility goes hand-in-hand with 'presence', which really is about improving productivity by providing a single contact number that follows staff when they leave and return to the desk.

Unified Communications offers two major management advantages. Placing all collaboration tools under the same umbrella allows the IT department to manage communications as a standard business application, while business managers gain greater visibility of where staff are and have the tools to allocate human resources when it counts.

In the end, how well your workforce responds to threats and opportunities defines both operational performance and the customer experience.

The NEC approach: bringing businesses together

The NEC journey to Unified Communications is not a 'big bang' approach to voice and data management.

Over the four decades that NEC has served Australian organisations, its approach has galvanised around three pillars: meeting the customer where they are, delivering present and future returns on the investment, and ensuring business continuity.

NEC's managed license transfer program recognises the importance of protecting customers' existing software and hardware investments by carrying across all related licenses, covering phone extensions that interface with the contact centre, presence solution or a PBX.

NEC also understands that not every role in an organisation demands the latest desktop phone. NEC customers have the flexibility to retain legacy handsets until they require upgrading, while delivering richer capabilities where the business needs it.

Some businesses have already implemented voice over IP (internet protocol), achieving lower call costs by pushing remote office voice across data networks and the continual move towards SIP (Session Initiated Protocol) and voice over IP (VoIP) prepares the business for greater mobility by extending critical business information from the ERP or CRM system to mobile devices.

The reality is that not all organisations require this technology today. Fortunately, embracing the benefits of NEC's Unified Communications does not demand a fully-deployed IP network. The same capabilities can be overlaid on legacy TDM systems.

However, the era where voice, video, conferencing and data are tightly integrated is already upon us, thanks to protocols that support multiple media streams. SIP connectivity, delivered by a SIP-enabled server and a client application on a mobile device, delivers this potential. Even on older infrastructure NEC is helping businesses deploy SIP to lower the cost of mobility and improve business efficiencies.

SIP adds another dimension to mobility that can be extended once the underlying network is updated. In the short term, the ability to convert and compress conversations into data offers a cheaper alternative for mobile executives than the utilisation of the carrier networks. As discussed earlier, presence adds another layer of productivity to the organisation.

NEC's experience and unique approach helps business drive down the cost of communicating and improve productivity, but also positions business to take advantage of new processes as the technology emerges.

Five steps to achieving an agile workforce

- 1. Agility depends on knowledge.** Workforce agility is the product of staff knowledge and access to the right information and people when it counts.
- 2. Visibility and perspective.** Knowing when and how customers or stakeholders engage supports efficient resource allocation by providing a factual base from which to make decisions that improve processes.
- 3. Swift connections.** A highly mobile workforce can be coordinated. Giving staff visibility of each other and the tools to connect to the right available person accelerates resolution and enables early intervention.
- 4. Controlled mobility.** Mobility puts productivity tools at workers' fingertips, but at the heart of a mobile strategy is centralised management of the devices, services, access and security.
- 5. Asset protection.** Deploying Unified Communications does not mean replacing all legacy software and hardware. Licensing, for example, can be carried at no cost, while physical assets such as handsets need not be discarded. Unified Communications, mobility and smart desk phones should target the functions where it delivers the greatest impact to the organisation. Processes, work culture, and the future business landscape will determine where and when to extend capabilities.

Case Study: UC delivers a coordinated workforce

Challenge

The organisation's rapidly growing client base, coupled with pressure to streamline its supply chain and the increasing trend for staff to conduct business away from their desks posed multiple challenges to the organisation.

While it wanted to improve communications for its mobile workforce, call centre and operations teams, management often faced resource constraints during peak demand. The organisation was adequately resourced but there was a mismatch between useable and available resources. Staff were keen to assist, but the organisation struggled to coordinate them at the right time.

Legacy environment

The existing NEC PBX telephony system had supported voice communications successfully for the past 10 years, including desktop telephony, voice mail, and messaging. While the system still met voice needs, a recent desktop and backend systems refresh gave it an opportunity to improve desktop and mobile communications and unify its voice and data systems.

The desktop refresh delivered many Unified Communications applications to the desktop environment, including video conferencing, instant messaging, enterprise social networking and collaboration tools. However, the existing PBX was unable to extend the new features to a mobile environment. For example, presence was available on the desktop, but it could not be extended to its mobile workforce. Nor could it support a SIP client on the mobile, which would help reduce mobile call and data costs and provide a richer toolset to mobilise staff.

Setting the agenda

The decision to refresh its voice platform was supported by a clear set of goals. The platform would need to provide lower communications costs as headcount expanded, and support new branch offices and increased mobility. It needed to deliver productivity improvements, better collaboration, and the tools for staff to transition seamlessly to and from the desktop. Management also wanted sales staff, wherever they were, to support the call centre during peak demand periods.

Solution

The organisation selected NEC's Lighthouse Lite, delivering it the SV8100 Unified Communications server and accompanying line and trunk packages. The migration was made easier after it discovered that extending its existing PBX NECare service agreement by three years meant the new platform came at no charge.

The organisation targeted the departments that required richer NEC desktop handsets and applications, but retained its existing fleet of mixed desktop phones for staff whose needs it suited. Extending presence to mobile via the new SIP client gave its workforce the power to coordinate and collaborate, no matter where they were located.

NEC protected the organisation's software investments under its Lighthouse License Migration program by replacing the legacy voice platform software and carrying forward port capacity and feature package licenses at no additional charge.

An important factor in the decision to migrate was NEC's deep integration experience. As Australia's only British Standards Institution certified provider of business continuity (BS25999.2) services, the organisation was assured of minimal disruptions during the migration and world class, around-the-clock support after the deployment.

Key services covered by NEC Australia's BS25999.2 certification include the provisioning and management of 24*7 National Service Desk, Billing Services, Data Centre Services, Service Delivery Management, NECare Assurance Services, NECare Repair and Maintenance Services and Network Infrastructure Services.

For more information, visit www.nec.com.au, email contactus@nec.com.au or call 131 632

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