

What to ask before you buy.

Checklist: Enterprise Unified Communications

Done right, UC (Unified Communications) can boost employees' productivity, help executives better manage a distributed work force and improve the company's response time to customers. Forrester Research Inc. is seeing growing momentum behind UC in the enterprise; the technology research firm expects a significant increase in deployments by the end of 2009.

UC integrates a variety of communication applications onto a single platform including email, IM (instant messaging), voice, collaboration tools and voice and video conferencing. The goal is to create a simplified, streamlined experience for the end-user. In general, a UC platform is layered on top of existing telephony infrastructure, so no major overhaul is required. You can also roll out an end-to-end UC solution or deploy UC components individually, adding to the system as users need more features. This checklist will help you determine whether your company is ready to launch a UC solution or roll out individual UC applications, as well as assist you in managing the decision-making process and evaluating potential providers.

Before evaluating your UC needs, be sure you fully understand all the different ways your company's employees work while in the office, on the road and while telecommuting so that you know what features and capabilities to look for in a UC solution.

Advantages to Unified Communications in the Enterprise

- UC unifies data, voice and collaboration applications onto one platform for easier management.
- UC leverages your existing IP infrastructure and existing communication applications, including email.
- UC preserves your investments in current communication systems and infrastructures.
- UC improves business processes.
- UC improves employee productivity.
- UC allows workers to more effectively communicate across lines of business.
- UC allows employees to communicate more quickly and accurately among company headquarters, branch offices and mobile workers.
- UC improves collaboration among a distributed work force.
- UC can lower travel costs by reducing the need for employees to travel to meetings.
- UC improves your company's response time to customers as well as the quality of the responses.
- UC gives mobile workers full access to the central telephony and email systems.
- UC can shorten sales cycles with improved communication.
- UC makes experts and decision makers in your company more accessible.

Disadvantages to Unified Communications in the Enterprise

- UC is still an immature technology, so providers' solutions will continue to evolve, perhaps even while you complete a UC rollout.
- Many UC applications are still in the early stages of development and may lack functionality.
- UC does not have a large installed base, so there isn't much real-world experience to draw on.
- UC does not yet have a set of best practices for enterprises to use when deploying the technology.
- Because UC may not have an immediate hard benefit to the company's bottom line, it can be difficult to make a winning business case for it.
- Users may initially resist UC technology, particularly presence applications that reveal their location and availability in real time.

Questions You Must Ask Before You Buy

- Will different business units share responsibility with the IT department for the UC budget?
- Does your IP network require any upgrades to support a UC solution?
- Does your network infrastructure have enough bandwidth to support the voice and video capabilities of UC?
- Are there any communications applications, like email, that should be upgraded or replaced as part of the UC rollout?
- Do you have any existing environments, such as Microsoft Exchange/Outlook or IBM Lotus/Notes, that would integrate better with a particular vendor's UC offering?
- Which business units or groups of workers would most benefit from being part of the first phase of your UC rollout?
- How and where do your company's employees work? You have to consider the communication needs of all employees, including those who are highly mobile, those who sit in front of a computer all day and those who work remotely.
- Do mobile employees use a particular handset or PDA device that must be supported by the UC solution?
- What range and type of end-user devices need to be supported?
- Do you need any additional servers to support the UC system?
- Do you need to implement additional security measures to protect the UC solution?
- Which UC applications should be deployed first? Which should be deployed in later phases of the UC rollout?
- Do you need a solution that integrates with existing desktop phones?
- Will you replace legacy desktop phones with IP phones?
- What kind of information, such as calendars and corporate directories, do mobile users need access to?
- Does the solution work in an SOA (Services Oriented Architecture)?
- Does the UC solution support SIP (Session Initiation Protocol) to enable integration with third-party UC applications?
- Would you benefit from using a vendor's design and planning services?

Basic Features All Solutions Must Supply

- Multivendor integration
- Unified messaging
- Presence
- Single client for the end-user to access all communication functions
- Single number and voice mailbox for all devices
- Simultaneous ringing
- IM
- Click-to-communicate

Additional Features That Should Be Included

- Audio, Web and video conferencing
- Call control
- Calendar control
- Text-to-speech inbox attendant
- Visual voice mail
- Desktop sharing
- Mobility

Questions to Ask a Vendor Before You Buy

- What is the exact list of features provided in the standard and advanced editions?
- Which applications and hardware components come with the complete UC solution?
- Can I purchase each UC component individually or as a UC suite?
- With which third-party applications does the UC solution integrate?
- Which third-party end-user devices, especially mobile phones and PDAs, does the UC solution support?
- Does the UC solution integrate with my existing PBX? Or does it include an IP PBX?
- Does it use SIP (Session Initiation Protocol)?
- Does it integrate freely with third-party UC applications? If it integrates only with particular third-party applications, which ones are they?
- What are my technical-support options?
- Do you offer services to help assess, design and implement a UC solution?
- Do you offer managed or hosted UC services?