UNIFIED COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES

Productivity Success Factors for the Mid-Market

How to gain competitive advantage using the latest conferencing and collaboration technologies.

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INTRODUCTION

Unified Communications (UC) technologies such as conferencing and collaboration have been providing significant benefits including enhanced productivity to large enterprises for several years, but the mid-market – those companies with between 100 and 1000 employees – are just now embracing these technologies for competitive advantage. The mid-market faces unique challenges that Unified Communications and related technologies can help address. New products and services are being introduced, aimed at the mid-market, to help this segment realize the benefits of improved communications. Mid-market companies focused on improving worker productivity and business results can implement conferencing and collaboration technologies to help workers better communicate with customers, partners, and co-workers. These conferencing and collaboration technologies and tools are helping mid-market companies solve their business problems while making their business processes more efficient and effective.

APPROACHES FOR ADOPTION

Productivity-enhancing technologies such as conferencing and collaboration will dramatically impact the way in which we work for the foreseeable future. These technologies enable people (employees, partners, customers, suppliers, etc.) to work together via real or non-real time communication, and share or exchange information, including documents and other types of content.

Individuals and teams need to constantly interact, communicate and share knowledge in order to effectively do their jobs, whether working in the main office, a satellite branch, or even remotely.

The ability for people to interact and communicate regardless of their location has a huge impact on productivity and cost-effectiveness. For example, many businesses rely on audio, web and video conferencing to help employees communicate quickly and effectively with expansive groups both internal and external to their firm. The result is faster business decisions, reduced development cycles, shorter project times, faster time to market, quicker response times and improved customer responsiveness, all of which make companies more competitive.

> **In general, an organization spending more than $2,500 or using more than 25,000 minutes on conferencing per month should consider an in-house solution.**

But how do you get started? Your approach may be influenced by your own business profile. The two most common approaches are a hosted solution or a premise-based solution. There are pros and cons to both.

- Hosted or service provider-based conferencing and collaboration enables companies to pay on a per-user, per-usage basis and does not require any installation or maintenance of equipment. For mid-sized companies without an IT staff, this can be an adequate solution.

- Premise-based conferencing and collaboration technologies provide a fixed-cost alternative and can be integrated with the organization's telephony and UC environment and infrastructure, but requires the purchase, installation and maintenance of equipment. For growing mid-sized companies with more complex collaboration needs, this option may be a better long term solution with a generally lower total cost of ownership (TCO) than a hosted solution.

Companies need to analyze their usage requirements and internal resources and determine which approach makes the most sense for their particular needs. In general, an organization spending more than $2,500 or using more than 25,000 minutes on conferencing per month should consider an in-house solution. Some companies start off with a service provider model for testing conferencing applications for a small number of users and then move to enterprise-wide adoption of a premise-based solution.

UNIQUE CRITERIA FOR TECHNOLOGY EVALUATION & SELECTION

As a mid-market company, you have unique challenges that your larger or smaller counterparts do not face. While you are expected to perform as well as your larger counterparts, providing high-level service and producing high-quality products, you generally have to "do more with less." In addition, you may feel increasing expectations to compete cost effectively against mega-companies, whether "big box" retail chains, multinational financial organizations, or healthcare conglomerates. For you, both pricing and performance of your technology solutions matter.

> **Doing more with less can produce a return on investment and total cost of ownership (TCO) that far outweigh the initial purchase price.**

Pricing Matters. As a result of these pressures, how you evaluate and purchase is unique to your needs. For example, the benefits derived from enhancing customer satisfaction, improving end user productivity and working better with business partners and suppliers may cause you to evaluate price differently. Doing more with less can produce a return on investment and total cost of ownership (TCO) that far outweigh the initial purchase price.

The products and technologies invested in must provide solid and significant value in helping you fulfill your business missions and help solve business problems. In other words, the business must drive the technology purchase.

Performance Matters. Mid-market companies have technology needs that are just as sophisticated as enterprises' needs; but with more limited IT staff and resources, they require products that are simple to install, use and maintain.

Technology vendors are beginning to take notice of mid-market firm challenges and are designing solutions that help them succeed in the face of many possible hindrances.

BUSINESS BENEFITS AND IMPACTS FOR MID-MARKET FIRMS

UC and the business benefits provided by conferencing and collaboration impact companies of all sizes, but there are specific ways in which they help mid-market firms – in terms of both the business and the individual workers.

Reduce Travel and Be Eco-Conscious — Travel and associated costs can be greatly reduced by using conferencing and collaboration technologies rather than having face-to-face meetings, while enabling individuals to work on projects with customers and partners quickly and easily.

As an added benefit, these tools and technologies are good for the environment. By reducing the amount of travel needed to interact with colleagues, customers and partners, conferencing technologies enable companies to be productive and effective while helping to reduce carbon emissions.

Increase workflow efficiency — Collaboration tools also enable workers to be more effective when they are built into the desktop environment. With many of the conferencing and collaboration products on the market today, workers can schedule calls through their desktop application (such as Microsoft Outlook or IBM Lotus Notes), check the presence status of colleagues and others to determine if they are available and "click-to-conference" to initiate a conference call and collaborative session on the fly, bringing in other individuals to the session as needed. In many cases an interaction may start out as in instant message exchange, and if needed, be escalated to an audio conference, web conference, or video conference, with the click of the mouse or by dragging and dropping participants' names from a buddy list into the conference.

> **Collaboration tools enable workers to be more effective when they are built into the desktop environment.**

Improve team effectiveness — With solutions like Web Conferencing and click-to-collaborate, workers can share documents, collaboratively "whiteboard" new ideas or capture brainstorming sessions that would be impossible to follow without a rich and dynamic set of communications tools.

Some of the functional areas that benefit the most from these productivity enabling technologies include:

- **Sales and marketing** teams can interact and collaborate with each other when preparing proposals, sales presentations and demos. Web conferencing and application sharing technologies enable teams to virtually demonstrate products to potential customers, shortening the sales cycle. Training sessions can be done virtually, saving time and money.

- **Manufacturing** teams can work together to share knowledge and information on product development, including conducting product reviews. Ad hoc conferences can be used when there is a problem or issue that needs to be resolved quickly.

- **Research and development** remote teams can work together and share documents and applications, making it easier to bring products to market faster and more effectively. Teams can consult with each other, as well as share, review and revise product specs, drawings and documentation.

- **Support organizations** can provide real-time access to technical procedures and repair techniques.

- **Consulting and professional business services organizations** experience higher productivity when they can collaborate with expert resources anywhere in the organization. Overall, teams can improve closure rates and reduce time and cost of project completion.

IMPLEMENTATION – HOW TO DO IT RIGHT IN 10 STEPS

There are a variety of conferencing and collaboration technology and product options available for mid-market companies. Those companies that are committed to enabling rich interactions for their workers need to identify and determine how best to implement these technologies in order to maximize their value to the organization. The following are some of the key steps every mid-market company should take as they implement unified communications and collaborative solutions.

Step 1. Embrace and welcome collaboration.

UC and collaboration are going to change the way in which you communicate and do your jobs and will be an important competitive differentiator among companies of all sizes. While your competitors may not be using these solutions today, they will do so shortly and you need to start thinking about your strategy NOW. While most of the products available today are aimed at enterprises, there are some new

products and services being introduced specifically for mid-market customers, emphasizing ease of implementation and ease of use, while being priced and packaged appropriately for the mid-market.

Step 2. Identify your objectives.

What is it you are trying to achieve and what are your corporate objectives? Without having a clear understanding of what it is you are trying to achieve, whether it's increased team productivity or responsiveness, increased speed to market, enhanced customer service, etc., you are just throwing technology at a problem, rather than using technology to achieve a specific purpose. With a measurable goal, the success of your collaboration solution deployment can be tracked and validated.

Step 3. Identify the individuals, groups and departments that can benefit from collaboration.

Companies must be careful in the way in which they roll out conferencing and collaboration products – they may not be needed for every job. It's therefore vital to identify which roles and job functions can benefit most from these solutions and how they can help. Expect to see UC and collaboration first be adopted by groups of people in specific jobs or business functions, such as engineering or product development workgroups, sales people, customer service reps, the marketing team working on a new promotion, or a development team working on a project, for example.

Step 4. Identify the business value that will be provided.

As mentioned previously, ROI and TCO are important for mid-market companies, but the business value of better communication and collaboration is even more important. The products and technologies must provide solid and significant value in helping your company fulfill its business mission and to help solve specific business problems.

Since the business must drive the technology purchase, it is important to focus on the most important areas for business value to your company. Business value should be measured in terms of reduced costs, increased savings, time saved and other factors.

Step 5. Make conferencing and collaboration part of an overall communications strategy.

Conferencing and collaboration is but one part of an overall communications strategy and should not be rolled out as an isolated silo, but rather as part of a comprehensive, enterprise-wide strategy. Integrating these capabilities into business applications and processes enables you to transform how work gets done and can help shorten cycle times and time to market. Think in terms of a holistic approach to communications.

As part of the holistic approach, it is important to evaluate your organization's desktop strategy and choose

collaboration solutions that will complement those applications. For example, if your organization has decided to standardize on Microsoft (Exchange, Outlook, Office Communicator, etc), be sure to choose collaboration solutions that can be integrated with and enhance that environment. The same is true for IBM environments – interoperability and integration is essential. Be aware of how different conferencing and telephony solutions will work within your existing and planned environment – not all solutions integrate and interoperate the same.

> ## Think in terms of a holistic approach to communications.

Step 6. Evaluate the many different UC and collaboration solutions available in the market today for mid-sized companies.

As mentioned, there are new solutions being introduced specifically for companies with 100 to 1,000 employees with appropriate price points and capabilities. Evaluate both service and premise-based solutions to determine which is right for you.

Not all solutions are alike – some will allow you to leverage existing switches, handsets, servers and infrastructure, while others will require more upgrades and new technology purchases.

Prior to the roll out, it is critical to evaluate whether there is any impact on the network infrastructure and what additional hardware may be needed. Where possible, try to leverage existing infrastructure and desktop applications. You may discover that you have to make some changes to your infrastructure.

While unlikely when using specific solutions designed for the mid-market, there may be a need for new servers and devices and changes to your network (conferencing technologies, especially video conferencing, often require additional bandwidth). Also think about how this will impact your budget in terms of telecom and IT staff as well as user training and support.

Step 7. Start planning trials and pilots.

It is important to conduct trials with a variety of end users. Also, consider including your executives, the CIO and appropriate department heads in the trials in order for them to evaluate the system and to identify possible applications and uses of the technology. Begin with one or two groups, build on your experience and go from there.

Step 8. Implement and roll out gradually and in phases.

Gradual, incremental adoption, rather than an overnight conversion can be instrumental in a successful long term deployment. Implementing new communication tools is not only a technological change for the organization, but it's also a cultural change for users.

An internal communications plan to introduce, remind, train and compare costs keeps people familiar with the new tool. Over time, the whole company will be using the new collaboration tools, but not necessarily at the same pace. Be sure that process improvements or cost-saving milestones are shared and celebrated among all of the participants who contributed to the success. Including all of the employees in the communication of steps toward the corporate goal will help overcome any cultural change challenges.

Step 9. Experiment!

UC and collaboration are all about the user experience, so let users experiment and explore the added value they provide. Users need time to learn how to optimize the technology and how it can enhance their job functions while making them more productive. And you'll be amazed at some of the innovative ways in which various workers use this technology!

Providing the training tools necessary is essential, so that users can take full advantage of the enhanced communication technologies. By providing initial and ongoing training, user manuals, online help and other materials, you can help ensure that users can properly implement and utilize the conferencing and collaboration tools provided.

Step 10. Measure, evaluate, revise.

Work with your vendor(s) to identify measurable ways in which to evaluate the productivity enhancements, cost savings, or increased revenues associated with the collaborative technologies.

Productivity can be seen in terms of individuals, teams or groups, and the enterprise or organization as a whole – but try to focus not on individual productivity, but how collaboration impacts the company's business and mission. Once you have implemented the solutions, measure and evaluate as much as possible, determine what changes need to be done and revise how the technology is being used, how it can be improved and which other groups can utilize these capabilities.

> **Focus on how collaboration impacts the company's mission.**

A phased implementation of the technologies, with the appropriate tracking mechanisms for using the new solutions, will ensure success and faster ROI.

Lastly, be ready for the viral impact these technologies have. Once you begin providing groups of workers with UC and collaboration capabilities, it won't be long before others are banging on your door to try them.

CONCLUSION

Mid-market companies are expected to provide the same level of product and services as larger enterprises, but must do more with less – less money, smaller staff, etc. The need to effectively communicate, collaborate, and interact and get work done becomes more difficult, particularly when teams and workgroups are spread out geographically and workers are often remote or virtual.

Tools to enable effective real-time and non-real-time communications become invaluable. UC and collaboration technologies enable individuals, workgroups, and enterprises to conduct meetings and become more effective while reducing the amount of travel previously necessary, thus saving time and money, while increasing efficiency.

New solutions specifically addressing the needs of mid-market companies will enable more of these organizations to take advantage of the latest communication technologies, making them more competitive and successful.

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