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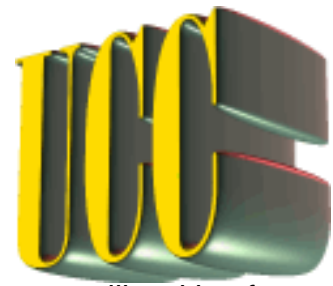
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The Unified View

**More Debate On The Value Proposition For Unified
Communications**

By Arthur Rosenberg and David A. Zimmer

As much as we are enthusiastic about the need and potential benefits that we expect from unified communications technology, we still see the industry running into that awkward, skeptical stage where users may like the concepts, but few are willing to go out of their way and pay extra for them. To add to the confusion, the terms "unified messaging" and, more recently, "unified communications," have almost as many definitions and implementation strategies as there are industry players claiming they have what everyone wants. The truth is, we are still waiting for everything to come together from the user's perspective, and we can find shortcomings in almost every product or service offering.



Our [April 3rd column](#) touched upon a study reported by Blair Pleasant from [The Pelorus Group](#). In our critical approach, we questioned the perceptions of users as to where the value in using an enterprise unified messaging system came from. We know that users will almost always find value in conveniences that enables them to be more efficient and spend less time with message management chores, so it's not as if they won't like unified messaging/communications.

Although we speculated that perhaps the time-saving benefits may largely originate from users being able to extend their workday by communicating while traveling or commuting, Ms. Pleasant hastened to let us know that only a small percentage of users in the study found communications during commuting to be significant. Likewise, where we suggested that the efficiency and ease of use benefits stemmed from simply using a better interface (such as Microsoft Outlook) at the desktop for voicemail management, only one user in the study found that to be true.

End User Benefits

Overall, the study confirmed the basic feeling of users, i.e., that "it helps people do their jobs better and faster by reducing the chores of message management." Blair Pleasant said there were numerous additional benefits cited by users in her study, including:

- "Everyone in the workgroup uses UM, and it makes them more responsive. The instant I send them a message, I can get a response in less than 30 seconds, and it can be a voice mail and they respond with email. Responsiveness is the improvement."
- "With the computer screen, it's nice to be able to sort by external or phone messages, you can even see whether it's internal or external and decide which you want to have first."
- "It is very difficult to put a number to this. It can result in a multimillion dollar job, or avoidance of some liability we might otherwise incur if I didn't pick up on something."
- "I can serve more customers. UM improves servicing, creates more time and I can service more clients. UM makes us more competitive in terms of what we do. It's a service issue."
- "It helps me use the time I have in office more efficiently. The time I have in office is more focused on projects rather than pushing information around."
- "We can respond to people in the most advantageous fashion -- via email, voicemail, forwarding an email with a voicemail annotation, etc."

Source: [The Pelorus Group](#)

All the users in the study worked for enterprise organizations that made the decision to implement UM and, of course, paid for every user's "seat." So it wasn't a decision that the individual user had to make, in terms of cost/benefits. Needless to say, Rosenberg's Second law then came into play, "Today's conveniences are tomorrow's necessities." Once they started to use the new UM capabilities, they loved it, and wondered how they could have ever gotten along without it! When asked what they would do if UM were taken away, most of them said that would be an unacceptable option.



Unanswered Questions

Of course, we had some other questions about the study that went unanswered. We wondered on what basis the implementation decision by enterprise management was made. Was there any pressing demand from users? Was the implementation a "forklift" replacement of a legacy voicemail system or was it a new "green fields" installation? In the case of one UK company, where traditional voicemail telephone answering is not as acceptable as in the U.S., the decision to implement a UM system was like a "green fields" situation; there was no legacy voicemail system to be replaced. With UM capabilities, however, voicemail could now be deployed for cross-media message management.

One respondent to our article did describe where his customers achieved real productivity gains from unified communications technology. We concur with his statement because we have experienced the same gain through our use of the service provided by [Linx Communications](#). Having calls forwarded to the called party with a



caller's name announcement permits the called party to decide whether taking the call is important or if it should be pushed to voicemail for later processing. This simple functionality allows the called party to be more responsive to callers, reduces the number of voice mails

that need to be returned later, and allows both parties to be productive by accomplishing the task at hand.

We have experienced this gain by using both the Linx service and through our "poor man's" version of call forwarding to a cell phone as reported in [a previous article](#). The Linx service gave us the greater productivity gain because of the caller name announcement and the ability to push the call to voicemail. Our call forwarding scheme does not provide the name announcement nor can we push the call to voicemail once it has been answered. Several times, our time was wasted in fruitless discussion with callers we should have pushed to voicemail.

Demographic Study

At our IBC USA Unified Communications Services conference in Orlando on March 20-22, one of the presentations discussed the results of a demographic usage study of unified messaging subscribers by a service provider in the UK named [Virtualplus](#). This report will be posted on our web site shortly.



As we have stated many times before, the value proposition of unified communications

will vary for individual users, and with the flurry of "free" services, its not clear what they will be willing to pay for different features and functions. From the enterprise perspective, the same holds true. Not every employee needs a UC seat, but should everyone in the organization get one? Also, since mobile users are the ones with the greatest need for the full range of UC capabilities, how will such users benefit from an enterprise CPE solution, when they must also use wireless voice services? We feel the key to any successful UM/UC solution is flexibility of features that can be tailored by the end user for their particular needs at different times. Go to [our Web site](#) and let us know what you think.

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