



THE CONTINUING EVOLUTION OF COLLABORATIVE TECHNOLOGIES

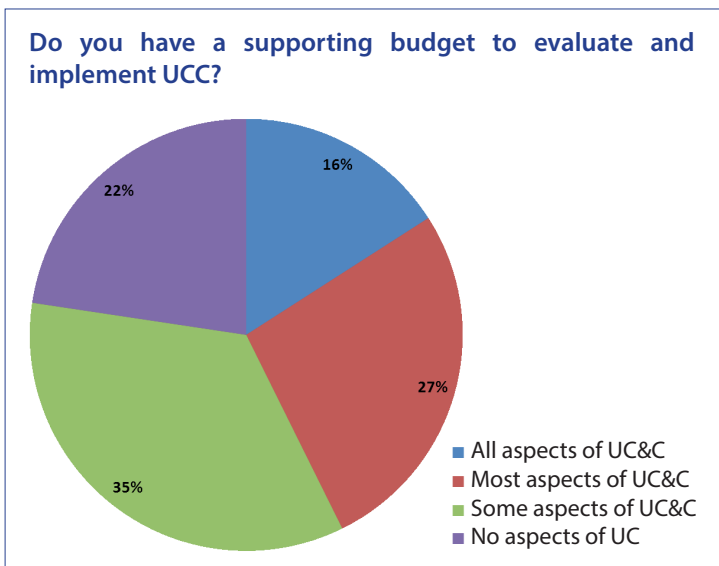


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Here at the IMCCA we’ve spent a lot of time discussing collaborative technologies in the context of hardware and the various manufacturer offerings. When we were asked by the *World Commerce Review* to provide an update to the space this year we felt it was important to point out that it’s not all about the hardware or software that an organization buys. Successful implementation of the technology is just as equally about an organization’s approach to the space.

In the past, Enterprise Collaboration was a term used to describe technology located in silos – including such areas as videoconference rooms equipped with AV, web conferencing applications, interactive whiteboards and advanced audio conferencing. Enterprises of today are beginning to realize that these are actually different sides of the same thing. Unified Communications (UC) or Unified Communications and Collaboration (UC&C) are the terms that describe this combined space. While it is clear that this is the correct direction for organizations to follow, many of them are still struggling to realize the vision.

Figure 1: Only 16% of technology leaders have adopted a unified strategy



In a survey of over 3,000 technology leaders that the global ICT service provider Dimension Data performed with Ovum research, only 16% of those surveyed were looking at the UC space as a whole when it came to budgets. Additionally, 22% weren’t even considering the implications of the combined technologies.

The reason that organizations are having so much trouble achieving the promise of Unified Communications is that it is not a product one can buy from the leading industry manufacturers (despite their sales pitch.) Successful UC is actually an outcome - and one that can only be achieved when appropriate technologies are deployed in combination with a future-ready strategic vision and a detailed adoption program. The best way to envision this is as the three legs of a stool.

- One leg is a realistic, rich understanding of the actual uses that are needed
- One leg is selecting the right technology to meet those needs
- The third leg is a specific adoption plan

If there’s a mismatch between the uses needed and the technology provided, the stool will fall. Without an effective adoption plan, the stool will also fall.

Understanding that there are users, not just one typical ‘user’, and driving adoption

When technology managers want to improve their organization’s collaboration technologies, they often make the mistake of starting by shopping around. They get a lot of information about products, comparing features and prices and trying to find the best match for what they perceive as their typical organizational user. But the process usually ends without achieving user satisfaction and without gaining significant utilization and ROI.

That’s because shopping for technology for a perceived ‘typical organizational user’ is not the correct place to start. Organizations don’t have a single ‘user.’ They have people – each one with different use cases. The correct first step

involves meeting with these people and understanding their pain points and business drivers. It requires creating a user segmentation plan that differentiates needs among key executives; people in manufacturing; frequent travellers; remote workers; team leaders; HR professionals, and so on. One has to pick the right tools for each, then build an architecture supporting the use of all those tools.

As a simple analogy – a hammer is a really great tool. Craftsmen would never be without one in their toolkit. However, if it was their only tool, and the needed job was cutting glass, the hammer would be a really lousy choice. It is just as ridiculous to assume that any one collaboration application or appliance can be widely distributed within any organization and meet all the needs. Only after identifying and classifying all the actual needs can tools to meet them be purchased. For an example, a typical organization might have the following list of user groups:

- Executives
- Team leaders
- External salespeople
- Internal sales support
- HR recruiters
- Manufacturing
- Point of sale/point of manufacture resources
- IT personnel
- Support personnel

The characteristics of ‘the right tool’ for each need - and the support requirements for each - vary significantly between each user type. Manufacturers who try to claim that their one hardware or software product is all that’s needed to cover all the needs are not presenting an accurate picture. One-size-fits-all solutions are never the correct direction for most organizations. Technology managers need to spend the time needed engaging representatives from an organizations actual user groups to understand their priorities and pain points before selecting a blend of technologies to meet their needs.

In addition, even when you select the right blend and build the ecosystem, the users are not necessarily going to come to your new technology ‘field of dreams’ – not without an adoption plan.

Figure 2: Without motivating users, new technology will not achieve maximum ROI



Driving usage and adoption is a matter of people

“Successful UC is actually an outcome - and one that can only be achieved when appropriate technologies are deployed in combination with a future-ready strategic vision and a detailed adoption program”

Some IT organizations will spend as much as two years on a technology deployment project, and then just announce it on a Friday afternoon before the Monday that it’s available. Then they wonder why people aren’t using it. The answer to that problem is generally due to inertia. People will not change their behaviours unless they are engaged to do just that. Motivating people to change behaviour requires nearly as much time and effort as any technology implementation plan.

The very same people that were engaged to discover actual user need have to be re-engaged to champion the use of new collaboration technologies throughout an organization. It closes the loop, instilling the understanding that actual needs are being heard and motivating users to change their behaviour. When correctly planned and coordinated adoption efforts can double the utilization numbers of any new technology and the resulting ROI.

Technologies to choose from – the cost of entry coming down

Over the last seven years (as we detailed many times in this publication) the cost of high-end systems used for collaboration (telepresence) was sometimes prohibitive. What we’ve seen in the last year is that like the proverbial pendulum, what has swung too far to one side often swings back too far to the other. In the last year we’ve seen the entrance of a number of collaborative hardware product offerings in the sub \$1K US range.

- TelyLabs – The firm that started it, TelyLabs last year introduced a new category of room-based collaboration system. Unlike traditional solutions which focused on providing an optimal experience for high profile situations regardless of price, this new category of solutions focuses on providing the most important features at an affordable price - suited for mass deployment. TelyLabs product was an all-in-one appliance that has an HD camera, codec and audio system in a compact bar that fit above or below a display.

- Logitech ConferenceCam CC3000e – In their approach to the sub 1K space Logitech omitted the codec but beefed-up the quality. Their solution has a full pan-tilt-zoom camera, table speaker/microphone and control surface – all terminating in a USB connector that you can plug-into any PC or Mac system and use with whatever soft client you like.

- Google Chromebox for Meetings – Most recently, Google has jumped feet-first into the meeting room collaboration



Figure 3: New systems - left top to bottom Tely, Logitech, Google, right Cisco MX

space with this new system. Made of a webcam, a speaker/microphone, a Chrome-based CPU and a remote control, this system is meant to enable a conference room to participate in their 'Hang-outs' soft conferencing product.

More expensive than software and a webcam alone, but less expensive than a traditional appliance, one has to be very clear about the capabilities and limitations of these new systems, and where they would fit into an organization's blend of technologies. Keep in mind the following rules of thumb:

- Webcams are good at capturing images of people sitting directly in front of their displays, however they are generally completely inappropriate for capturing the images of three or more people sitting in a room. Don't let the marketing pictures or stories from even the most reputable firm deceive you into believing you'll see anything but a wide shot of tiny people.
- Low end appliances will generally produce better images than software alone, but are almost universally not monitorable. If you want to know the status of the video systems on your network in case someone has kicked-out a plug or experienced some other failure than these are just not for you. If you're deploying a collaboration device in a critical area or for a VIP spend a little more money at the front end instead of spending a lot more time on the back end

explaining how you couldn't tell that it had failed before the user tried unsuccessfully to use it.

- Ensure that you understand the interoperability strategy of any low-end system. In some cases they only work with other units from the same manufacturer. In other cases the manufacturer provides an 'off-ramp' for interoperability, but using it may result in poor experiences, additional use charges or both. Don't assume that a system that meets an organization's needs today will be able to grow with that organization in the most cost effective manner.

On the other hand, there are new choices in modular systems that do include all the features of past high-end systems. The Cisco MX200 and MX300 for example are fully self-contained room systems that have large displays, PTZ cameras, control systems, and still have the remote management capabilities of traditional systems. They're not sub \$1K US, but they're also not the tens of thousands traditional room systems can cost (or the hundreds of thousands that immersive telepresence can cost.) Organizations are now embracing these lower cost choices because they realize that industry best practices have changed. In the recent past, free-standing systems were looked-down-upon as somehow reflecting a cheaper image for a user firm. Now, organizations have realized that the most expensive, integrated conference rooms were really not utilized very well for a number of reasons. Buying a quantity of inexpensive systems instead of just one expensive system

(as long as it does one or two things very well) is no longer perceived as a bad choice.

Interoperability is still the key

Organizations are not just looking for less expensive systems, they are still in search of easy to use solutions. Collaboration end users want to ensure that whatever other systems they happen to be using will be able to work with whatever other system are in use – both inside and outside their organizations. Part of making this a reality is selecting interoperable systems as part of the blend we discussed, but part of it has also begun to rest on the shoulders of third party firms. A few new players in the industry are creating a niche for themselves by enabling this interoperability. In a few brief years BlueJeans has established itself as the de-facto cloud based interoperability provider, allowing any-to-any connections between systems of most types. (Exceptions would include Vidyo who wants you to use their own Videoway any-to-any service; and Skype – from which Microsoft inexplicably pulled all third party connectivity.) Now new players Acano and Pexip enable this interoperability to be located on an organizations premises – with Acano's gateway abilities already deployed at a number of organizations and Pexip's just coming to market.

These third parties are today allowing for richer interoperability than many collaboration technology manufacturers support on their own (with the most typical case using these new gateways being Microsoft Lync clients communicating with Cisco infrastructure. Microsoft and Cisco do support direct interoperability, but it is more limited.)

We here at the IMCCA will continue to stay on top of related trends and Emerging technologies and encourage our members to strengthen and grow the overall collaborative conferencing and unified communications industry. ■

ABOUT THE IMCCA

The IMCCA is a non-profit industry association resolved to strengthen and grow the overall conferencing and collaboration market by providing impartial information and education about people-to-people communication and collaboration technology and applications. Founded in 1998, the IMCCA membership is open to end users, vendors and other interested professionals who wish to share their disciplines and knowledge for the benefit of members and the interested general public. The IMCCA offers an open and interactive environment for these activities, including participation in trade shows and industry events and the IMCCA website. If you are interested in more information about the IMCCA please visit our website www.imcca.org or contact the Executive Director, Carol Zelkin at +1 516 818 8184 or czelkin@imcca.org

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