RESEARCH

Top Considerations for a Unified Communications Purchase

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Introduction: The Evolution of Unified Communications

Unified communications (UC) has been a continually evolving market for the past decade. UC was initially centered on voice over IP (VoIP) and unified messaging, but has expanded significantly over the past several years. While VoIP remains a foundational technology, the breadth of UC applications has expanded to include collaborative applications such as video, mobile services, social media and document sharing (see Exhibit 1). Additionally, deployment options have expanded from premise-based solutions to include cloud and virtual options.

Exhibit 1: UC Taxonomy
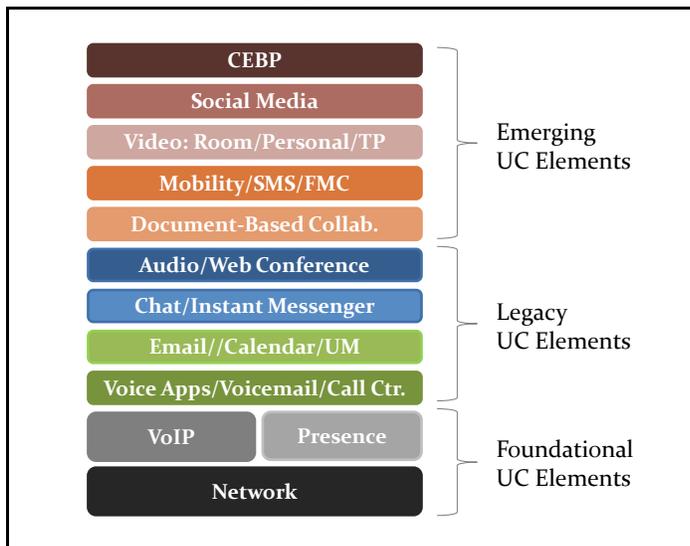
Source: ZK Research, 2013

If implemented correctly, UC is a powerful technology with a multifaceted value proposition. In addition to lowering the cost of communications, UC can improve productivity by streamlining processes and enabling new processes through creation of communications-enabled business processes. UC can help any organization make better, more accurate decisions faster, no matter where an individual is located or what their preferred collaboration tool is.

Clearly, the UC market has shifted and organizations currently considering a purchase must consider the technology as more of a platform for current and future collaborative experiences, instead of just a set of technologies that can replace legacy communications systems.

Understanding how solutions have evolved may not be obvious, as there are many critical factors to consider. This document provides the most relevant decision criteria to help organizations make the best decision possible.

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Influence and insight through social media

Section II: Top Considerations

The landscape of solution providers claiming a place in the UC industry has grown by an order of magnitude over the past five years. Choosing the right vendor is crucial. This purchase will be a key decision for improving corporate collaboration. The most important considerations when choosing a solution provider are:

- **Investment protection for yesterday, today and tomorrow:** This revolves around interoperability with legacy systems, which is very important, but often overlooks what the new solution offers for investment protection. The typical lifespan for a communications solution is 7 to 10 years. Evaluators should choose a solution where the new hardware will still be in use a number of years from now. For example, IP phones are one of the largest areas of spend. Some vendors offer very little backward-compatibility with IP phones. Purchasing new phones ever two or three years drastically increases the overall TCO for the UC solution.

- **Performance over wired and wireless networks:** Most UC solution providers have developed partnerships and deployment guides to help maintain consistent levels of service quality for voice and video on wired networks. This is particularly true for UC providers that do not offer their own network infrastructure. However, this only addresses part of the challenge, as more and more devices used for corporate communications are wireless-only. Considering the meteoric rise of mobile devices, it's very important to consider UC performance over wired and wireless networks.

- **Consistency across deployment options:** There are many deployment options to consider. Customers may choose between hosted, cloud, premise or virtual versions of products. There is no universal right answer, as companies should choose the deployment model that fits their organization's software strategy best. In fact, it's likely that most companies will choose a combination of these options to meet the challenges posed by remote workers, branch offices and other constituents. Evaluators should choose a provider that can accommodate any of these deployment options and have feature parity across them.

- **Mobility features:** Mobile devices such as tablets and smart phones are becoming increasingly important to corporate workers (see Exhibit 2). Supporting mobile devices and BYOD initiatives is no longer a nice-to-have; instead IT must ensure corporate workers have all necessary communications and collaboration capabilities when using any device, anywhere. However, this can be a challenge, as there is no de facto standard mobile operating system. Choose a vendor that offers consistent features across a variety of device types and operating systems.
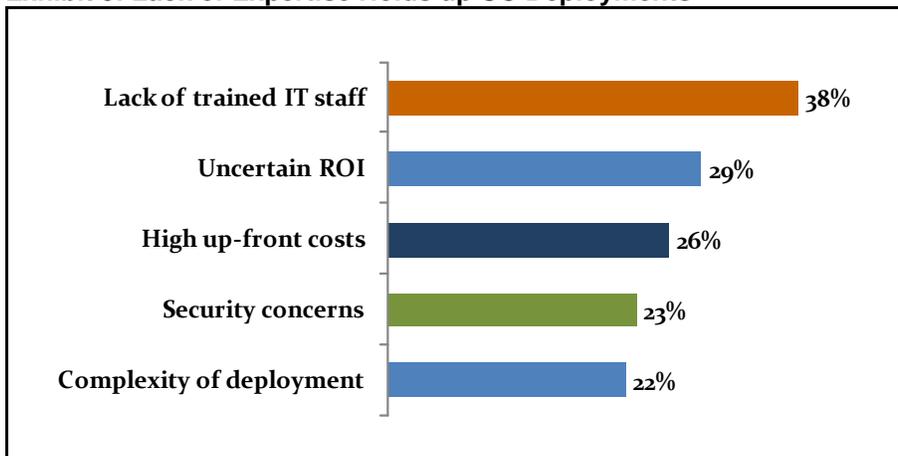
Exhibit 2: Mobile Devices are Mainstream Business Tools
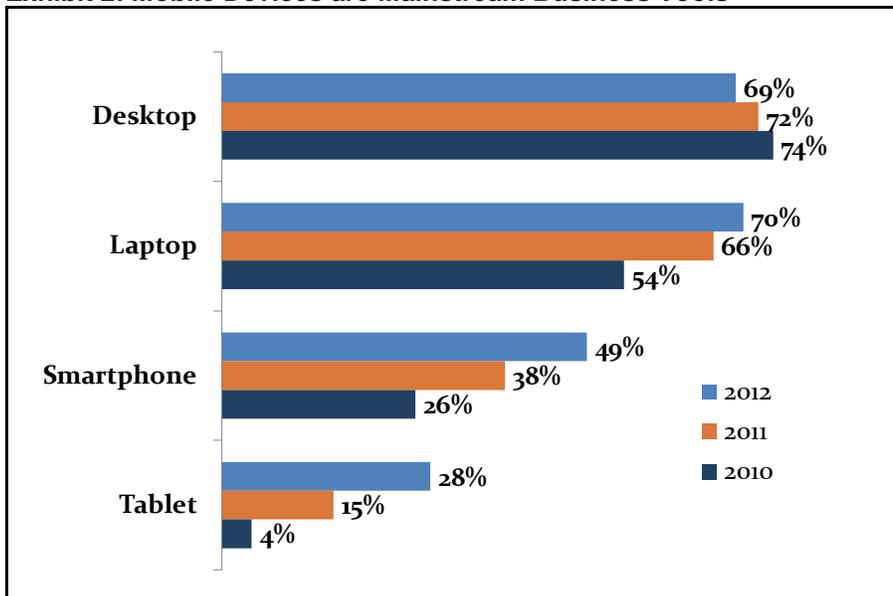
Source: ZK Research, 2013

- **Broad video portfolio:** Video use is exploding as companies take advantage of easy to use and better quality video applications to find better, more efficient ways of collaborating. Video enables collaborative groups to make the best possible decisions with the most information in as short a time as possible. However, there are many flavors of video today that can be used for different purposes. For example, telepresence is a great tool for replicating in-person, scheduled meetings. Desktop video is ideal for quick, ad hoc conversations. Having broad range of video-enabled products including room based, desktop, cloud, telepresence and recorded video today is a must for any company looking at a UC deployment. Additionally, a number of emerging use cases of recorded video and mobile video should be considered.

- **Architectural approach:** Legacy communication systems were large, monolithic devices that were easy to deploy but offered few advanced features. Today's solutions have many components including hardware applications, multiple software components, wired and wireless endpoints, cloud-based applications plus a number of other components. This can lead to long deployment times with weeks of tweaking. This is one reason the biggest barrier to broader UC adoption is a lack of trained IT staff (see Exhibit 3). Additionally, UC demands a high-quality network optimized for performance of real-time applications. A solution provider that takes an architectural approach can ensure a better experience, with faster deployment times at a lower overall TCO, vs. an approach where IT managers must stitch together a solution from multiple vendors.

Exhibit 3: Lack of Expertise Holds up UC Deployments

Lack of trained IT staff — 38%
Uncertain ROI — 29%
High up-front costs — 26%
Security concerns — 23%
Complexity of deployment — 22%

Source: ZK Research, 2013

- **Global support model:** UC solutions can be more difficult to deploy on a worldwide scale given the complexities and costs associated with creating a global network for collaboration. Make sure to evaluate the post-sale deployment services and ongoing technical support costs as different vendors have very different approaches.

Section III: Conclusion and Recommendations

UC is a powerful technology with a multifaceted value proposition. UC has the power to change the way people work, streamline or create new business processes and raise corporate productivity to new heights, all at a significantly lower cost than traditional communications.

Making a decision on a solution provider is not easy. Vendors have different strengths and weaknesses, which can confuse the decision process. Choosing the right vendor is critical, as today's UC deployment will have a huge impact on future corporate collaboration. To help with the decision process, ZK Research recommends the following:

- **Understand all the costs before making a decision:** Some vendors position their solution as "free" by making some of the software available for no cost. However, as customers go through deployment they uncover a number of other costs such as IP phones, servers, gateways and other components. It's extremely important customers understand all of the costs associated with UC to avoid having to go find more budget after the deployment has started.

- **Think of UC as an architecture, not a product:** When evaluating UC solutions, many customers look only at specific desktop and telephony functions. However, UC should be thought of as an architectural platform to build on. IT departments should look at advanced UC architecture components, integration structure, software communities and other criteria. The decision is similar to choosing an IT application platform vendor.

- **Modify business process to take advantage of new features:** UC deployments are most effective when business processes are streamlined to take advantage of new communications tools. At a minimum, most human latency can be removed from existing processes. Ideally, IT departments should work with line-of-business managers to rebuild processes with UC in mind.