
Three-quarters of senior managers experience delays from inadequate communication. Team performance, company efficiency and business competitiveness are frequently compromised because communications are not unified. By demolishing the barrier between the phone system and IT infrastructure, and by adding an additional layer of advanced capability, unified communications offers an easy to implement and simple to manage solution.

This paper explains unified communications and analyses its benefits in the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It also covers six essential things you need to know and provides useful guidance on how to calculate the return on investment from a unified communications strategy.

Disjointed communications: A pan-SME challenge

Traditionally, telephone systems have been isolated by physical boundaries and separated from all other forms of communication – such as email, video and messaging. With ever increasing pressures to respond quickly to customers, improve performance, manage rising costs and support an increasingly mobile workforce, the inefficiencies of this isolation have intensified.

Crucially, the problems caused by disjointed communications, where various communication methods are not integrated, can significantly impact overall business performance.

An international survey revealed 75% of senior managers experience delays due to the inability

of project teams to reach decision makers.¹ These delays may arise from having to call multiple numbers several times before the decision maker is reached. Several time consuming voicemails and emails may also be exchanged in the process.

As a direct impact of disjointed communications, team performance, company efficiency and business competitiveness are compromised. Further, the vast majority of senior managers believe these communication delays affect customer satisfaction and the ability to attract and retain key personnel, which can have a major impact on long-term business performance.²

To overcome communication challenges, technologies such as Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) telephony have opened new opportunities. Specifically, by demolishing the barrier between the phone system and IT infrastructure, and by adding an additional layer of advanced capability, communications can be merged in a concept known as unified communications.

90% of employees spend at least some time out of the office⁶, and by 2015 it is expected that 1.3 billion people will work remotely using mobile technology (37.2% of the world's entire workforce).⁷ Mobile working has forced workers to use a variety of communication devices and channels, which only heightens the communication challenge and strengthens the need to deploy unified communications.

Benefits of unified communications for the SME

The benefits of unified communications for SMEs can be far reaching and significantly improve strategic performance.



A happier, more motivated and mobile workforce

There is a stack of evidence which shows that companies that allow staff to work remotely enjoy productivity boosts from a more motivated workforce with a better work/life balance.⁸ Remote and mobile working however can mean that the colleague who used to sit on the opposite desk is now based 50 miles or more from the office, which can create significant communication challenges. By recognising there is no single solution to fit all business environments, unified communications ensures all the benefits of remote and mobile working are achieved while keeping the workforce connected and collaborative. Importantly, employees can be empowered to make their own decision as to where they work and how they communicate, while still enjoying the same communication experience as their officebased colleagues.

As well as improving the morale of existing staff, a remote and mobile working strategy in conjunction with unified communications can attract new talent and widen the recruitment pool to prospective employees who would have otherwise been deemed to live too far away.

Of course, if the infrastructure for remote working is already in place, the impact of severe winter weather or a natural disaster can be minimised by enabling employees to work productively from home.

Increased productivity

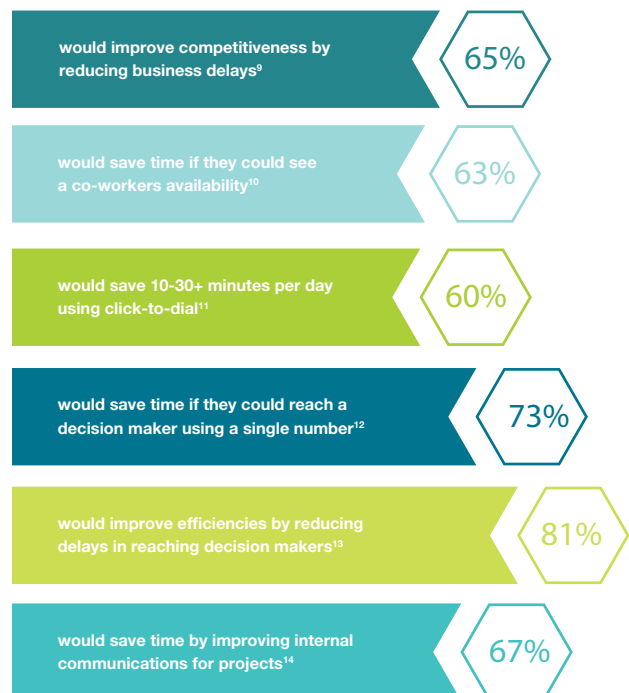
Unified communications enables SMEs to communicate and collaborate more productively in a number of key ways:

- a single, personal telephone number or extension, which enables employees to be reached easily, regardless of their location
- presence information, which shows the real-time availability of co-workers and therefore how and when they can be successfully reached
- click-to-dial functionality, which allows telephone numbers in emails or web browsers to be dialled with a single mouse click
- ad hoc audio and video conference sessions, to facilitate instant and rich communication without incurring any travelling time or expense
- instant messaging (on-screen text chats) with individuals or groups, as a quicker, more interactive alternative to email

Features such as this provide the infrastructure to enable businesses to become more flexible, agile and competitive. Research indicates that by making more informed decisions quicker, the efficiency and success of the entire organisation can be improved.

Greater collaboration

Greater collaboration is a key benefit of unified communications, facilitated by easy and interactive communication between employees, departments and teams, wherever they are in the world.



Greater collaboration can in turn improve productivity, knowledge sharing, internal relationships and outcomes. For SMEs, this could translate into a faster product development cycle, quicker project completion times and improved employee satisfaction, which can all have a sizeable impact on overall business performance.

Research shows that being able to reach decision makers more quickly will lead to benefits including improved efficiencies (81%), improved competitiveness (66%), lower overall costs (60%) and improved collaboration and project management (56%).¹⁵

Rapid problem resolution

Rather than waiting hours, or even days or weeks for a response, unified communications ensures employees can get the information they need to quickly resolve a problem. In turn this can deliver benefits ranging from quicker project delivery to crisis avoidance and ultimately, increased sales.¹⁶

Higher customer satisfaction

69% of SMEs believe that customer support would be improved if employees could collaborate in real-time with their managers.¹⁷ Solving problems more quickly by providing easier access to the right people will ultimately lead to higher customer satisfaction.

Reduced costs and overheads

More than half of SMEs estimate that audio/video conferencing facilities would save one or more trips per year per travelling manager. By facilitating real-time communication, the cost of employees travelling to meetings can be dramatically reduced – both in employee transit time and travel expenses.¹⁸

Furthermore, with a greater proportion of employees working remotely, property overheads can be lowered too. Hot-desking for example, where multiple workers use the same single physical workstation or surface at different times, can significantly reduce the amount of office space required.¹⁹ What's more, by allowing employees to work from home, any costs incurred in accommodating workers can be reduced or even eliminated. In 2012, Wakefield Council announced its plans to save more than £1 million by installing technology that will allow for more flexible working practices.²⁰

Training is another significant cost that can be reduced as a direct result of unified communications. Research indicates that 68% of SMEs would benefit from training personnel via web and video conferencing and 73% believe it would lower the cost of training, with 69% suggesting by at least 5%. 68% even indicated that training via web and video conferencing would have a positive benefit on the number of educational programmes offered.²¹



More environmentally friendly

By facilitating remote working, unified communications can significantly reduce the carbon footprint associated with traditional commuting. Audio and video conferencing can also reduce the amount of business travel.

In its own right, unified communications is a green technology, requiring little hardware. Softphones, for example, can replace handsets which would otherwise end up in landfill.

Similarly, unified communications is an application that can be easily deployed on the existing network – it does not require a new server or separate cabling. Software updates are simply downloaded from the Internet, which further reduces carbon consumption by avoiding the use of CDs, packaging and delivery services.

Six things you need to know about unified communications

When considering adopting a unified communications strategy, it is important to keep in mind the following key points:²²

Unified communications is a service, not a product

This means that while the return on investment is still applicable to the outcomes driven by unified communications, the financial rationale needs to be based more on the total cost of ownership.

Voice still matters, but unified communications is not just about telephony

Unified communications is not just a phone system upgrade. Crucially, the desk phone is no longer the communications hub of your business. Voice has more value when seamlessly integrated with other communication methods, and that is the fundamental premise of unified communications.

Unified communications is a work-in-progress

It's important to bear in mind that unified communications will never reach a fixed state, so waiting for technology to mature before you adopt is a hopeless exercise. Constant innovation is core to its value proposition and while the offerings may already seem extensive, they are only the beginning.

Unified communications is not about lowering telecom costs

While unified communications may deliver telecom savings, the true value lies in the bigger picture. The biggest savings are achieved from the productivity gains and the overall improvement in business processes.

Business benefits from unified communications are strategic

Unified communications is a strategic investment, which enables businesses to become more competitive through increased productivity and collaboration, and quicker problem resolution. Ultimately, unified communications can deliver benefits such as higher customer satisfaction, lower employee turnover and a quicker time to market.

Unified communications is easy to implement

Contrary to popular belief, unified communications can be extremely easy to implement. It can often be integrated with your existing VoIP telephone system and client software can be simply downloaded from the Internet.

Calculating the return on investment

While the financial rationale for unified communications should be primarily based on the total cost of ownership, it is relatively quick and easy to calculate savings and therefore a return on investment.

Savings may arise from:

Reduced travelling expenses

Unified communications can significantly reduce commuting and travel to meetings, saving both fuel and the cost of employee transit.

Reduced overheads

By facilitating remote working, office space can be minimised, which in turn will reduce costs such as rent, lighting and heating.

Reduced cost of audio and video conferencing

Many unified communication packages include the option of audio and video conferencing, which will eliminate the need for additional separate expenditure.

Reduced IT equipment costs

As previously covered, unified communications is a software-based application, which eliminates the need to buy or update expensive IT equipment and can actually replace desktop handsets. Existing IP handsets can also be integrated seamlessly into the unified communications environment.

Improved collaboration, productivity and decision making

Although more difficult to quantify, these benefits can deliver vital strategic outcomes including quicker problem resolution, reduced time to market, and improved customer satisfaction and knowledge sharing.

Achieving unified communications with VoIPOffice Communicator

VoIPOffice Communicator is a free unified communications service specifically designed to work with and leverage the benefits of Telappliant's VoIPOffice Hosted telephone system.

Features include:

Softphone with video

Make and receive telephone calls using your computer, or take part in video conversations with other VoIP users.

IP handset integration

Control your IP phone using your computer.

Presence

See whether your contacts are available before you call them.

Click-to-dial

Click-to-dial telephone numbers in emails or web browsers.

Screen popping

See who's calling you with a pop-up window on your computer desktop

Instant messaging

Take part in on-screen text chats with individuals or groups.

Contacts integration

Import contacts from Apple[®] Address Book, Google[®] Contacts and Microsoft[®] Outlook[®].

Call management tools

View and manage voicemails and dialled, received and missed calls using your computer.

CRM system integration

Automatically open a CRM contact record when calls are placed to or received from that contact.

For a small monthly fee, the Free Edition of VoIPOffice Communicator can be upgraded to the Business Edition, which also includes audio conferencing, video conferencing, fax messaging and surveillance camera monitoring.

Alternatively, the Call Centre Edition includes all the benefits of the Business Edition, but with the added functionality of advanced CRM system integration as well as real-time monitoring and statistics.

ABOUT TELAPPLIANT

Telappliant has been delivering Internet telephony solutions since 2003. It is a founding member of the Internet Telephony Service Providers Association (ITSPA) and was one of the first companies to launch VoIP services into the UK SME market.

Telappliant owns one of the largest VoIP networks in the country and through its flagship VoIP phone system, VoIPOffice Hosted, provides a reliable telephony service to more than 20,000 businesses.

VoIPOffice Hosted Professional is an IP PBX solution hosted by Telappliant 'in the cloud'. It provides low cost calls at less than 1p per

minute and enables users to enjoy the features and benefits of an advanced business telephone system but without the hardware and maintenance costs.

Telappliant also offers a range of complementary VoIP services. These include SIP trunking (VoIP 'telephone lines'), VoIP-optimised broadband, global telephone numbers and unified communications solutions.

The company is fully ISO 9001 certified and uniquely positioned to deliver state-of-the-art, integrated end-to-end solutions, with high quality business support and dedicated account management.

DISCOVER VOIPOFFICE COMMUNICATOR

Existing VoIPOffice™ user?

If you are an existing VoIPOffice™ Hosted Professional or VoIPOffice™ Hosted for Call Centres user, please contact your account manager to enable VoIPOffice Communicator on your account. You will then be able to download the VoIPOffice Communicator client software from www.telappliant.com/voipoffice-communicator and start using it immediately.

New to VoIPOffice™?

If you have never experienced the benefits of the VoIPOffice™ phone system, you can find more information and arrange a free no obligation trial of VoIPOffice™ Hosted Professional with VoIPOffice™ Communicator at www.telappliant.com/free-trial or by calling 0845 004 4040. The trial is designed to avoid any disruptions to your business and can run concurrently with your existing telephone system and numbers.

For 10% off VoIPOffice™, quote the code 'WHITEPAPER' when you place your order.

