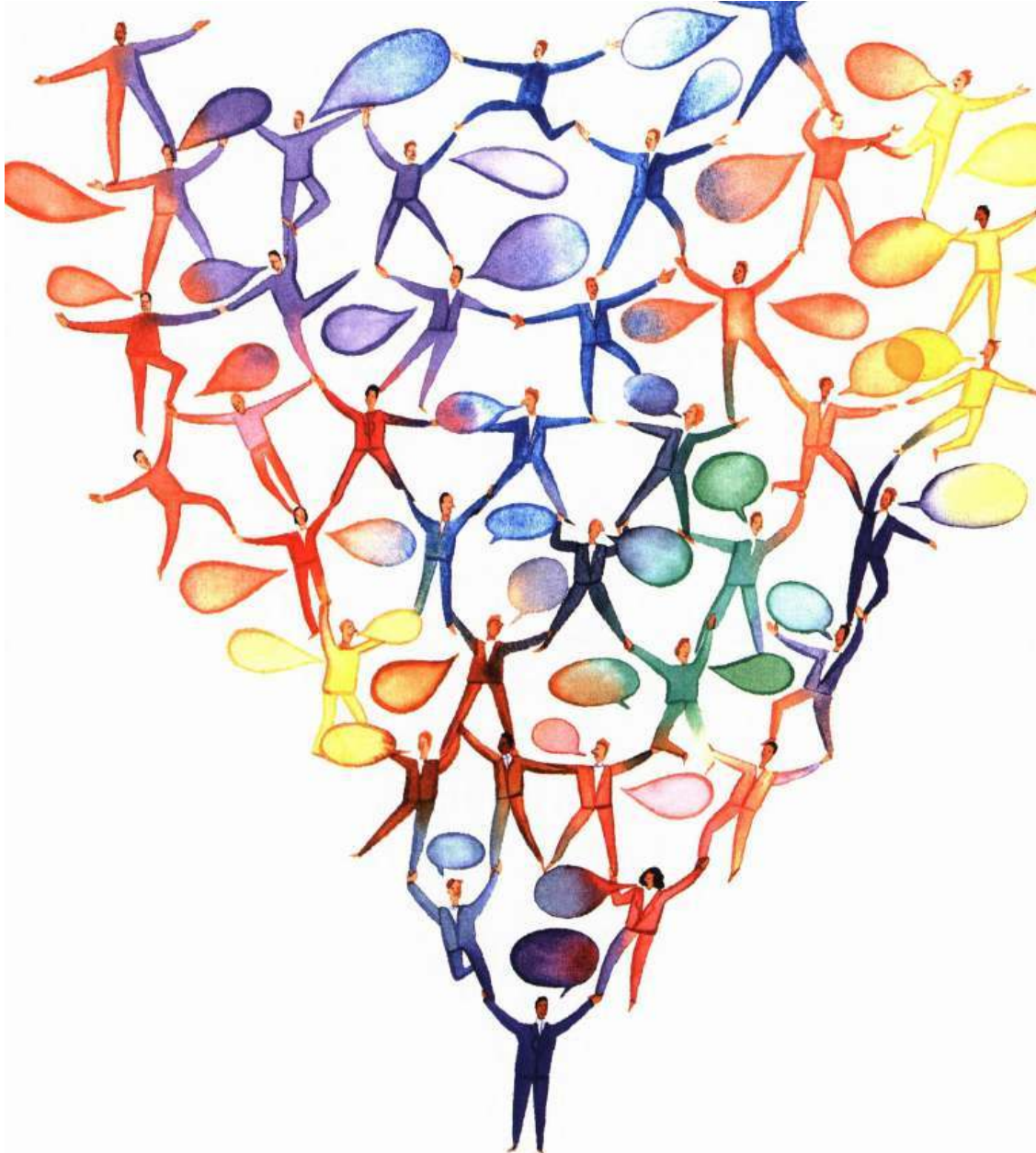


# THE AMAZING BUSINESS WORLD OF UNIFIED COMMS

Modern businesses are looking for seamless communications solutions that integrate both fixed and mobile applications. Glenn Baker went to some major solution providers to learn about the benefits of unified communications technology – and why now's a good time to upgrade.





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**M**ention the term ‘unified communications’ to a business owner and you’ll quickly notice a definite glaze over the eyes. It’s a concept that’s been around for a while, quietly impacting on the face of business communications, but when it comes to understanding the concept many business owners find it hard to get their head around it. “Show me the benefits” I hear you say!

UC technology is only just coming into its own in 2011, thanks to the full integration of mobility.

And the benefits to businesses are based around responsiveness to customers (they can get hold of your staff easier), greater productivity (your staff can work remotely and still be easy to contact) and more flexibility (supporting more flexible working practices and being scalable to match your changes in your workforce). The roll-out of ultra-fast broadband will only serve to accelerate these benefits.

“Many unified communications solutions have had their origins in fixed technology but the real benefits to the customer come when mobility is at the heart of the solution,” says Becky Lloyd, GM business marketing at Vodafone. “The world is increasingly mobile and when businesses have a seamless solution that can include voicemail, email, videoconferencing, instant messaging, presence, a range of ‘PBX’ features, and calling, all available wherever it is needed, it can really change the way those businesses operate.”

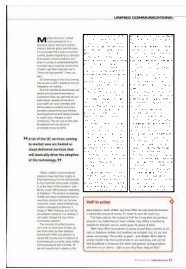
The concept of unified comms isn’t new, so what level of take-up has there been by New Zealand businesses? Well, according to a recent IDC survey just 12 percent of businesses are currently using unified communications with a further 19 percent expecting to deploy in the

### **VoIP in action**

Jianni Koutsos, owner of iBike, says Easy Office not only saved his business a substantial amount of money, it’s made his work life easier too.

“I’ve been sold on the concept of VoIP for a long time, but previous products I’ve trialled haven’t been reliable. Easy Office is backed by Vodafone’s fantastic service, which gives me peace of mind.

“With Easy Office my business is saving around \$200 a month as all calls to Vodafone mobiles and landlines are included. But, it’s not just about cost savings. The product is good – and reliable. We’re able to simply transfer calls from point-of-sale to our workshop, and use the fast broadband to showcase the latest and greatest cycling products and news to our clients – right on our shop floor using an iPad.”



next 12 months. Sixty-eight percent of businesses expect to be using unified communications in the next 24 months and a Telstra white paper estimates the UC market to be worth \$150 million annually by 2014.

The main barrier to businesses taking up new technologies is inertia. Businesses have not had a compelling reason to change and often cannot see the benefits to their business. They are wary of the costs of implementation, have a lack of awareness of ongoing costs and many businesses just don't know what is available.

The role of the telecommunications industry, suggests Lloyd, is to help businesses understand the huge benefits of unified communications and enable them with simple solutions.

"We can also play a key role in enabling businesses to tap into all the benefits of a truly mobile workforce.

"Business communications have become increasingly complex and employees often have to manage multiple devices, applications and face-to-face interactions in order to stay connected with customers and colleagues," she adds. "They can also have multiple contact details, work in different countries or constantly be on the road. This makes contacting people very difficult, and can result in leaving the same message multiple times through different channels."

Vodafone has a new all-in-one UC and IP (Internet protocol) telephony solution called Easy Office that addresses these issues. It offers a comprehensive landline, calling and broadband package which allows

small and medium sized businesses a cost-effective way to manage all their communications.

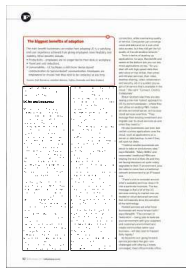
Easy Office offers security and there're no lag time issues, says Lloyd. Business owners should like the sound of that – there have traditionally been questions regarding call quality, cost and set-up complexity surrounding IP telephony, she reminds us.

"Quality of VoIP (Voice over IP) solutions has improved dramatically over the past few years. The main factor impacting call quality is the speed of the Internet connection. During Vodafone's trial of Easy Office, they tested the solution with Internet speeds reduced to dial-up levels and there was no significant impact on quality.

"The set up costs [IP telephony] have been expensive in the past and required complicated installs," says Lloyd. "Our customers receive free hardware and we have professional installers who will set up our solution on site. Customers can also use existing telephone equipment, further reducing one of the previously high costs of changing to an IP solution."

Lloyd says Vodafone already understood that services like fax, eftpos and monitored alarms are critical for small business. However, they found customers also wanted a backup in case of an Internet outage. "Vodafone has incorporated this into its Easy Office proposition, which includes a standard PSTN line. So even if customers experience an Internet outage they will still be able to make and receive calls.

"Our modems also come with the ability to add a mobile broadband



stick which works as a backup Internet connection in the case of a fixed Internet outage.”

### **UC for small business**

Meanwhile, across town at gen-i's impressive new corporate HQ in Victoria Street West, Peter Meredith, business manager product development, informs me his company took its first real step into the UC world for small business 18 months ago with its Smart Call product. Smart Call links a business's fixed line phone with a mobile phone through a single voicemail box. “A customer can dial a typical local number and the mobile phone will ring simultaneously. You get your fixed and mobile charges included in the one monthly fee. A lot of businesses use it because they can be contactable on either device and they have a single voicemail box for both phones. That's basic unified comms.”

Further up the functionality chain, Meredith says gen-i's Mobile Office product has also had a lot of take-up. “We've had a lot of customers with a PBX and primarily using their mobile device. They wanted the full functionality of a PBX delivered on a mobile – which is what Mobile Office delivers.

“You get features such as extension-to-extension calling, group calling, as well as 'presence' of users – who's on the phone, who's off the phone. It's full PBX functionality and it's completely scalable.”

Meredith says their first conversation with potential business clients is typically around fixed and mobile solutions. “Then it's integration with email, and progressively they look at

how they can collaborate with other businesses.” Incidentally, he says, the 2011 Telecom and NZHerald.co.nz Small Business Survey results show that 52 percent of smartphone users surveyed now use their smartphone to access email. 93 percent of small businesses surveyed used their mobile phones for business calls with the mobile phone being their key choice of communication.

Unified comms is about businesses being contactable and able to share information, and doing it seamlessly – whether it's via voice, email, document sharing, instant messaging, websites, and so on. It's also about making it easy for clients and suppliers to do business with you, says Shaun Graham, business manager, corporate channel customer engagement solutions for gen-i.

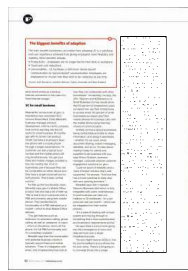
“Look for proof of reliability and a 'best of breed' solution that's well supported,” he advises. “And one that has a future roadmap to keep step with your growing business.”

Meredith says Gen-i markets Telecom Business Mail which is fully integrated with users' smartphones. A small business can take one mailbox or 20 mailboxes – for a set price per user per month – which can be integrated into their mobile phones.

“It's a case of starting with a basic system and moving through to something that's more sophisticated as a business's requirements evolve.”

He says there's a lot of work going into the convergence of voice and data services over a single broadband access.

“So you might have an ADSL2+ line for your broadband and a phone line for your voice. There's a lot going on to converge those into a single



connection, while maintaining quality of service. Companies can converge voice and data and run it over a full data access, but they still get the full quality of the old landline network.”

Think in terms of layering up applications, he says. Bandwidth and speed at the bottom lets you run lots more applications on top. “So you start off with high speed data then add voice on top of that, then email and intranet services, then video, desktop sharing, video collaboration and security. All of a sudden you’ve got a full service that’s available in the cloud.”. We call it “Connect, Control, Collaborate”.

Shaun Graham says they are also seeing a low-risk ‘hybrid’ approach to UC by some businesses – where they can utilise an existing PBX, mobile

phones and email server, and access cloud services over time. “They leverage their existing investment and migrate over to cloud services as and when they need to.”

He says businesses can even test certain comms applications over the cloud, such as applications on a server or data backup, to see if they will work for them.

“I believe smaller businesses are about to take an evolutionary step,” says Meredith. “Many SMEs’ and corporates’ traditional PBXs are nearing the end of their life and they are facing decisions on quite costly upgrades to their IT environment, plus the need to move from a traditional network environment to an IP based one.

“There’s a lot to consider around

what’s available and how does it fit into a particular business. The key message is that a lot of the UC services coming to market now are hosted or cloud delivered services that will basically drive the adoption of the technology.

Hosted services are what most businesses will move forward with,” says Meredith. “The concept of ‘federation’ – being able to federate your environment with your suppliers and customers environment and create communities within your business – will also start to happen fairly rapidly.”

As he points out: going forward, service providers like gen-i are challenged with offering a totally converged, fixed office/mobile office,

### **The biggest benefits of adoption**

The main benefit businesses can realise from adopting UC is a satisfying end-user experience achieved from giving employees more flexibility and mobility. Other benefits include:

- Productivity – employees are no longer tied to their desk or workplace.
- Travel and cost reductions.
- Contactability – UC facilitates a shift from ‘device-based’ communication to ‘person-based’ communication. Employees are empowered to choose how they wish to be contacted at any time.

Source: Karl Durrance, solution director, Fujitsu Australia and New Zealand



365-day-a-year comms service for businesses "from the hostable cloud". The benefits of how this service works in practice were highlighted many times over by the recent experiences of Canterbury enterprises that had to quickly relocate premises after the quakes.

"We had people down there using the extension functionality on Mobile Office working as a receptionist from home, answering and transferring calls," says Meredith. "And within 24 hours companies were back up and running, dealing with staff and customers."

The roadmap forward for UC includes the integration of mobile devices such as iPads, iPhones and Android-capable devices. It also involves the integration of Facebook, LinkedIn and other social media sites. "We can enable the phone numbers within these sites to act like a user's address book," says Meredith. "That's the other side of UC. A lot of businesses are now using Facebook

as a mechanism to link with customers."

### **Greater productivity**

The real value of unified comms is through having access to the right people and resources required to get the job done properly. It allows for easier, direct collaboration between co-workers even if they are not located in the same office, says Vodafone's Becky Lloyd.

"There has been an increase in flexible working with more people working on the road, from home, off smart devices, etc so it's more important now that they remain connected with their colleagues and clients.

"Overall, UC solutions allow for greater workforce productivity by reducing the amount of time spent trying to get hold of each other and streamlining communications processes – both in the office and out and about. Team effectiveness is

boosted through improved collaboration – integrating calendaring, email, web conferencing and instant messaging with communication tools.

"While most UC solutions currently provide the integration of voice and messaging – future services will extend to integration of business applications, presence, and a range of cloud-based hosted services. These developments will continue to drive increased productivity and effectiveness of communications for businesses of all sizes," says Lloyd.

Your preferred service provider should be able to tailor a product specific to your business needs, she says. "Look at the overall solution, including mobile and fixed. Getting this all from one provider can reduce overall costs. Don't be afraid to get quotes from other providers either so you can compare the costs and benefits."

Glenn Baker is editor of NZBusiness.