

# Accelerating Unified Communications with an Enterprise-Wide Architecture



by Zeus Kerravala | March 2009

## Executive Summary

The communications industry has touted voice over IP (VoIP) and unified communications (UC) as technologies that can transform the way workers collaborate and raise the bar on workers' productivity. However, despite much industry hype, the majority of UC applications deployed revolves around basic conferencing services and unified messaging. More strategic UC applications, such as presence and mobile integration, remain near the bottom of the list of already-deployed UC applications. This raises the question: If UC has so much corporate value, why has technology adoption struggled?

The answer lies in the underlying architecture used to support UC. Traditional communications systems were highly siloed, closed systems that necessitated organizations deploy them on a location-by-location basis. Although these systems met the communications challenges of our work environment 30 years ago, they cannot scale communications for today's increasingly mobile and remote work force. To meet the needs of today's work force and support many of today's business challenges, a new architecture for communications is required. This new architecture should have the following characteristics:

- Built on industry standards such as SIP and XML to allow for multivendor interoperability and long-term scalability
- Designed as a set of loosely coupled application objects, similar to a company's Web or IP application infrastructure
- Uses a three-tier architecture that decouples users and their devices from systems and applications
- Uses UC services as centrally deployed applications, distributed from the corporate data center over the company network to all remote workers and branch locations

This report will define unified communications and the business needs that drive UC, raise awareness of the challenges associated with UC deployment, and then define what a new architecture should look like. Finally, it will provide the reader with insight into how to choose a solutions vendor and pursue the next steps in UC deployment.

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## I. Unified Communications Enables the Anywhere Enterprise

Organizations have torn down their corporate walls and are moving toward becoming Anywhere Enterprises—globally integrated companies that are networked together and productively combine a variety of constituents (for more information on the definition and evolution of an Anywhere Enterprise, see the March 2007 Yankee Group Report “[Consumers Define the Anywhere Enterprise](#)”). Employees, partners, suppliers and customers are all important components of an Anywhere Enterprise. They need the ability to communicate faster and more collaboratively over a variety of devices and mediums.

Over time, organizations have deployed myriad communications tools to help people communicate better with one another. These tools include telephony systems, conferencing, collaboration tools, e-mail and a number of other communications devices and applications.

Although these devices address the need for faster communications, few of them are linked together. This disconnect creates a manageability headache for workers and for IT departments, and prohibits the organization’s workers from reaching their full potential productivity levels.

To achieve their full potential, organizations need the ability to communicate and collaborate better. Competitive advantage is no longer about any single person or core capability. Today, the ability of the entire extended enterprise to communicate and collaborate with each of its constituents in real time forms the basis for competitive advantage. The technology inefficiencies created by having multiple communications tools are a significant challenge for workers trying to collaborate better. Organizations have turned to unified communications (UC) as a method of meeting this challenge.

## Unified Communications Defined

Unified communications brings all of a company’s communications and collaborative capabilities together. It improves the ecosystem’s manageability and effectiveness and makes the enterprise more responsive and agile. UC enables enterprises to achieve their full potential and ultimately gain an advantage over the competition.

UC is the convergence of all forms of audio, video, Web, desktop and mobile communications on an IP network that breaks down all distance, time and media barriers. UC enables people to communicate with each other anywhere, any time, over any device.

The Yankee Group taxonomy for UC is based on the concept that there are two foundational elements of UC and a number of other related, but optional applications. The foundational elements of UC are:

- **Presence:** This is the ability to understand another user’s availability and communications preference. Consumer instant messaging tools have raised users’ awareness of presence, but have incorrectly linked it to chat. In fact, presence can be associated not only with users, but also devices, such as medical equipment, alarm systems and event documents, to accelerate workflows and business processes.
- **Voice over IP (VoIP):** Long-term, voice services will be embedded in almost every business application. Because of this, we see VoIP as a critical component of UC and one of the foundational UC technologies. The reliability, scalability and security requirements now associated with voice will be extended to the applications and media needed to deliver all forms of unified communications.

The optional UC components include the following:

- **Voice mail:** Voice mail has been a standard telephony feature for years and is widely deployed through small and large businesses. Innovation in the UC space has been to provide a single voice mail box that is accessible from multiple devices—inclusive of voice mail, voice mail via text to speech, e-mail, etc.
- **E-mail:** Another widely deployed application, many UC components will be integrated into e-mail.
- **Unified messaging:** The convergence of voice mail and e-mail. This is the most basic form of non-real-time UC and has been around for over a decade.
- **Mobile client:** Enterprise mobility is rapidly becoming a key driver for UC. A robust mobile client will be what allows a user to access their UC tools from a mobile device.
- **Fixed-mobile convergence (FMC):** FMC enables a worker to seamlessly move calls between the desktop and mobile phone as well as maintain the state of a call between cellular and wireless LAN networks.
- **Integrated multimedia conferencing:** Conferencing applications have been around for more than a decade, but only recently have the solutions been integrated by the UC providers. This includes video, Web and audio conferencing.

- **Chat/instant messaging (IM):** IM started as a consumer tool, but it rapidly evolved into a corporate tool. It is widely deployed in enterprises as a secure, corporate communications solution.
- **Contact center integration:** The contact center was an early adopter of integrating telephony into business applications. Providing screen pops and other enhanced telephony features has enabled contact center agents to streamline and improve the customer service process.

These are the main components of UC, but under the Yankee Group taxonomy, other telephony or presence-enabled applications such as speech recognition and telecommuter solutions such as soft phones or click-to-call can be included. Exhibit I shows the penetration rate of UC applications to date. As the market evolves, the definition of UC will further expand.

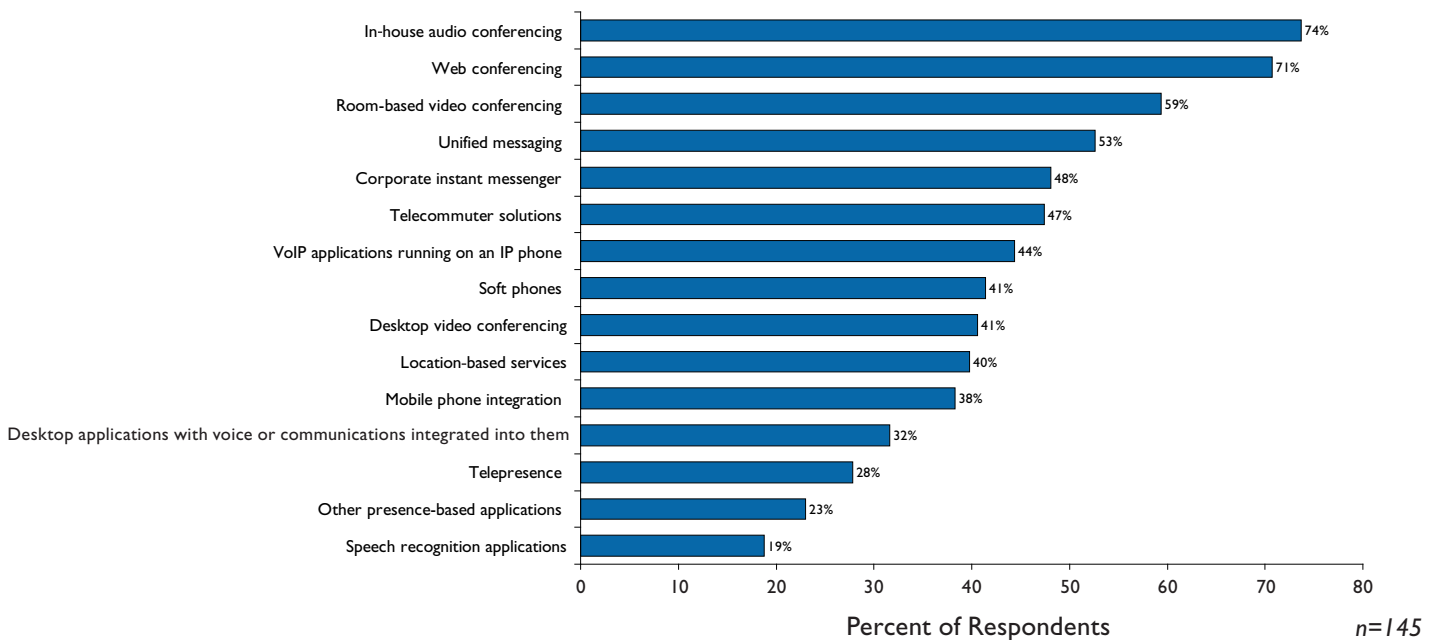
The value proposition of UC is multifaceted. UC is one of the few technology initiatives that can help organizations lower the overall IT costs while improving user productivity. Specifically, UC can:

- Lower the cost of corporate communications
- Improve worker productivity through advanced collaboration tools
- Create new communications-enabled business processes
- Improve customer satisfaction

**Exhibit I  
Enterprises' Adoption of UC Applications**

Source: Anywhere Enterprise—Large: 2008 U.S. Fixed-Mobile Convergence/IP Communications Survey

**Which of the following UC applications have you deployed?**



UC was historically thought of as an initiative to save money. However, over time the focus of the value proposition changed. Although cost savings still remains a big part of the decision to move to UC, especially in today's tough economic climate, UC's real potential is as a foundation for fundamentally changing business and building long-term competitive advantage. UC will evolve from providing seamless communications to being embedded in corporate applications, allowing companies to create communications-enabled business processes. These communications-centric processes will streamline or even automate much of the human delay in communications.

## II. The Challenges in Deploying UC

Despite all of its benefits, unified communications deployments remain low. As Exhibit 1 (on the previous page) shows, the majority of the UC applications deployed revolves around conferencing services and unified messaging. More strategic UC applications, such as presence, mobile integration and video, remain near the bottom of the list.

UC is a software, IP-based application that needs to have a different deployment architecture than traditional communications. Following the same communications architecture as traditional voice services adds complexity that drives the cost of the UC solution up to the point where the cost exceeds the value received from deploying it. The Yankee Group Anywhere Enterprise—Large: 2008 U.S. Fixed-Mobile Convergence/IP Communications Survey reveals that almost a third of the respondents cite uncertainty about the price/cost advantage of UC as the number-one inhibitor to deploying IP-based telephony, an important component of UC (see Exhibit 2).

### Exhibit 2. UC Inhibitors

Source: Anywhere Enterprise—Large: 2008 U.S. Fixed-Mobile Convergence/IP Communications Survey

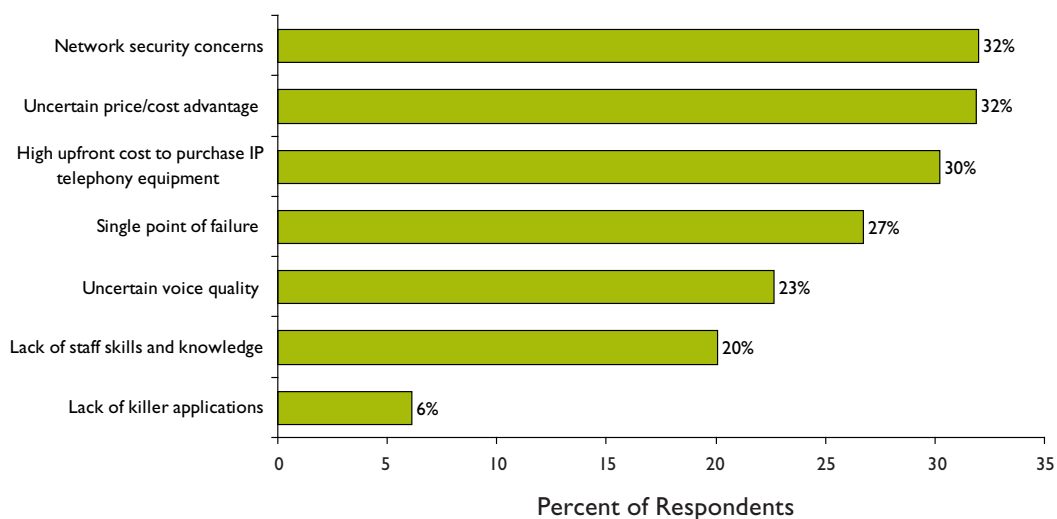
Additionally, more than 30 percent of the survey respondents cited the high cost of upgrading the voice infrastructure as a barrier to UC deployment.

One of the main reasons cost has become an issue is that many of UC vendors, most notably vendors that tie their solutions to the network infrastructure, promote a "rip and replace" strategy, where the deploying organization would simply remove every old PBX and replace it with a new IP PBX. The truth is this strategy limits the value of the deployment. To understand the problem better, the traditional deployment method needs to be reviewed.

With traditional TDM voice deployments, each location had to have its own PBX infrastructure because the services run at Layer 2 of the OSI stack, meaning the service itself was confined to that particular location. It was often the case that each location had the decision-making authority of the voice infrastructure, and had its own local maintenance contract and its own vendor of choice, meaning there wasn't a corporate standard. The problem with making decisions on a location-by-location basis is that features and user experience vary from location to location, making working in smaller remote locations or locations that just have earlier software releases very difficult. Traditional PBXs met the business challenges when workers tended to be in fewer, larger locations, but they do not meet the challenges of a continually growing mobile workforce. As companies go through a UC deployment, the following challenges cannot be overcome using an architecture designed for TDM-based PBXs:

- **Location-dependent features and functions:** Because the decision on what infrastructure to use tends to be made on a node-by-node basis, telephony features tend to vary between branches, creating a highly inconsistent user experience.

### What are the main challenges in deploying IP telephony?



- **Inefficient use of IP network:** Many of the organizations Yankee Group has interviewed tend to use VoIP on the local area network (LAN) segments only. Calls over the wide area network (WAN) go through a gateway, then out over the public switch telephone network (PSTN). The “IP” network is only minimally leveraged, so the promise of IP communications is not fully realized.
- **Heterogeneous, multivendor environments with a mix of TDM and IP will not scale:** Although the traditional node-by-node deployment model allows for companies to run a variety of PBX and IP PBX systems, the deployment will always be a collection of independent boxes rather than a “system” where consistent features and functions are delivered across the organization.
- **The transition to IP needs to be a “hot cutover”:** If an organization follows the same deployment architecture, the typical deployment tactic is to remove the old PBX and put in a new IP PBX. However, this simply replicates all the problems that traditional systems had and gives none of the benefits of having the systems run at the IP layer.
- **Limited return on investment (ROI):** Following an architecture made for traditional systems requires a heavy up-front investment in capital equipment because each branch requires new hardware. This can delay the ROI on the move to VoIP for several years.
- **A long road to UC:** Deploying UC will be very difficult if a traditional deployment model is followed because each system will have its own upgrade path to UC and different UC tools. This means the ability to share information across the systems will be limited.

There are many benefits for companies that choose to move to VoIP and UC. However, a new deployment architecture is needed for companies to realize UC’s full benefits.

### III. A New Architecture for UC

Unified communications and VoIP are not like traditional voice services, so the underlying architecture that supports them needs to change. As discussed in the previous section, traditional voice runs at Layer 2 of the OSI stack, meaning it doesn’t have the ability to run over a wide area network. For this reason, each location had to have its own infrastructure. Conversely, IP-based applications tend to be centralized, then distributed over an organization’s wide area network. Take, for example, a Web-based application. The Web runs at Layer 3 of the OSI stack, or the “IP layer,” meaning

it has the ability to traverse the entire length of a network as long as it’s configured correctly. When an organization deploys a Web application or any other IP-based corporate application, the servers are centrally located in the company’s data center and the end points (laptops, PCs, mobile phones, etc.) make a request back to those servers to fetch the required information. It doesn’t matter where in the world the user or the servers are, the communications between the client and servers work because of IP.

The new architecture needed for UC would follow the same deployment model of today’s Web- and IP-based applications, using a centralized architecture based on standards-based, loosely coupled components. In this architecture, telephony and other UC services would be centrally deployed services that would be distributed to remote locations over the WAN, like other corporate applications. This type of centralized architecture is significantly simpler than traditional voice architectures and will scale with the organization. The characteristics of this type of architecture would be the following:

- Communications applications deployed centrally in corporate data centers and distributed over the IP network
- Built on industry standards such as SIP and XML
- Three-tiered architecture that removes the dependencies among the user devices, access points and applications
- Supports multivendor environments, and mixed legacy and new IP systems
- Ability to add new features incrementally without having to forklift upgrade
- Leverages central SIP trunking that is shared across the enterprise, reducing the need for local trunking at separate locations
- Enables more advanced SIP-based consumer, service provider and “cloud” services to be securely brought into the enterprise

This type of architecture is essentially the enterprise equivalent of what service providers have had in place for IP multimedia subsystem deployments (IMS) for years. Using a more loosely coupled architecture has enabled service providers to roll out new services to millions of subscribers globally. Enterprises need to become service providers themselves and leverage similar principles and ideas to more easily serve their own people, wherever they are. Using the same SIP standards within the enterprise will also simplify the connection between enterprise communications and external service providers—starting with SIP trunking but expanding to rich media services in the future of the new UC architecture.

There are many benefits to a new UC architecture that arise due to overall design simplification (see Exhibit 3). With a traditional architecture, connections had to be made between every location and every other location, creating a management burden. With a Web architecture, all of the data is sent back through a centrally managed infrastructure. This type of architecture results in delivering on the “real value of IP”, the value that was never truly delivered given the complexity of implementation. So what was always technically possible is now both technically possible and manageable, and another key to successful deployment and adoption of business-critical UC applications.

Typically corporate benefits from IT projects fall into one of two categories: they help companies save money or improve user productivity. Deploying a new architecture will actually accomplish both for organizations, while also providing a foundation for the future.

### Immediate Cost Savings

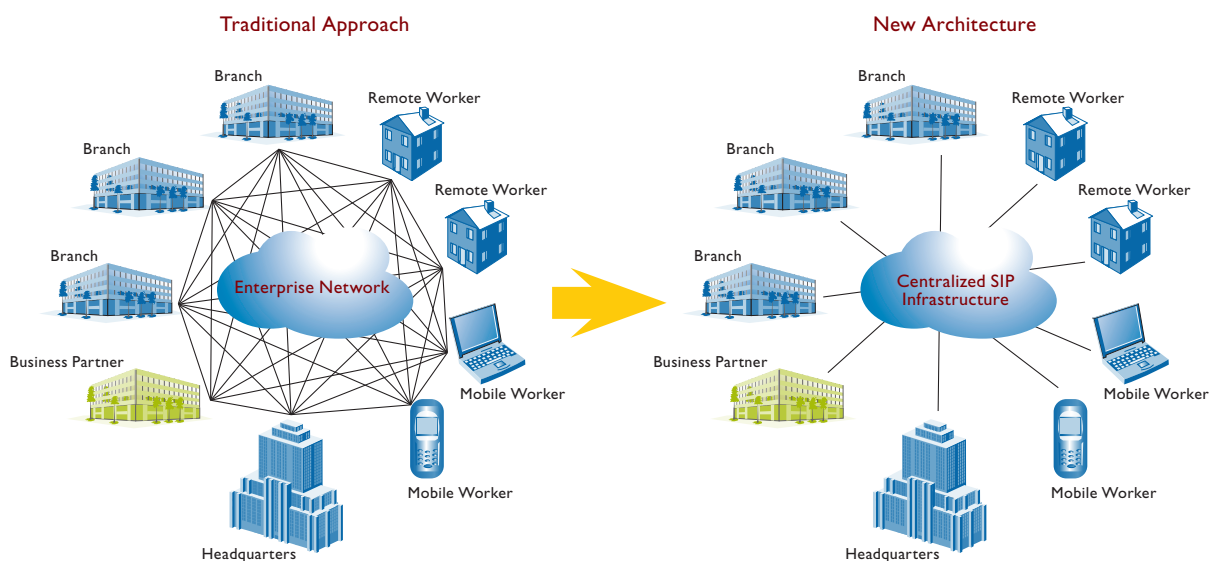
By deploying UC with a more Web-like architecture, companies will be able to realize immediate cost savings. In this current economic climate, it's important that all IT projects deliver immediate payback. Some of the more impactful areas of savings are listed below.

- **Corporate-wide, on-net calling:** Although long distance rates have fallen by orders of magnitude during the past 10 years, some organizations still spend millions of dollars every year making calls between locations. This new, IP-based architecture would enable organizations to have all office-to-office telephone calls ride over the corporate data network, similar to other applications.

- **Least cost routing:** On-net calling addresses calls that are made between locations, but companies also make a significant amount of calls to numbers that are off-net. A global, least call routing plan would allow a corporate, off-net long-distance call to ride the corporate network to the closest egress point. For example, a worker in an office in the U.S. wants to call a customer in Japan. Because the company happens to have an office in Japan, the call could be sent from the U.S. across the corporate data network to Japan, then made as a local call, saving on long-distance toll charges.
- **Reduction in trunk lines:** With traditional voice architecture, each location would have dual trunks to connect the office to the PSTN. That means a company with 500 locations would have to purchase 1,000 trunks to provide telephony service to all of its locations. Using an IP-based architecture, a company could purchase a reduced number of centralized SIP trunks and have all off-net calls exit the corporate network through these centrally managed shared trunks whenever possible. Depending on the organization and the location of the offices, this can reduce trunking costs by as much as 90 percent and save companies millions of dollars every year.
- **Integration with legacy systems:** Because the new architecture is built on IP and SIP, the new system can easily integrate with legacy systems from multiple vendors through the use of cost-effective SIP gateways. Traditional architectures would force organizations to either replace all of the systems at once or have no interoperability between the old systems and the new ones. Enabling legacy and IP systems to be mixed allows companies to migrate at their own pace to new technology.

### Exhibit 3. UC Architectures, Before and After

Source: Yankee Group, 2009



## Improvements in User Productivity

- **A single, enterprise-wide dial plan:** Companies with a large number of offices often have overly complex dial plans to call between offices. This means users trying to reach a co-worker often need to reference complicated calling plans that are region- or office-specific. A single, enterprise dial plan would allow workers to reach each other with greater consistency. Additionally, this dial plan can be administered from one central location, reducing the amount of IT time needed to support the company dial plan.
- **Consistency of communications services, no matter where the user is:** Because the deployment of infrastructure was made on a case-by-case basis, not all services are accessible in the same way, nor are they available in all locations. A centrally deployed architecture would ensure that the same services are accessed the same way in all locations.
- **Support for mobile workers:** The Yankee Group Anywhere Enterprise—Large: 2008 U.S. Fixed-Mobile Convergence/IP Communications Survey revealed that more than 40 percent of the workforce is now mobile (which we define as a worker that spends more than 20 percent of his or her time away from his or her primary work location). Additionally, mobile workers are becoming increasingly more diverse and make up more than just the traditional mobile professional (see Exhibit 4). The new architecture allows for seamless integration with mobile devices, providing the mobile worker with a number of benefits such as:
  - A single number to be reached at that can span fixed and mobile devices
  - Access to corporate information, such as presence information or corporate directories when mobile
  - Seamless roaming across independent wireless and wired networks
  - Consistent user experience across mobile and desktop devices
- **Improve customer service by providing the right information to the right people:** An architecture based on open systems would allow for the integration of front-office, back-office, contact center and sales information, as well as any other customer-relevant departments. This ensures that any worker who is communicating with a customer has the best available information and can reach the best associate in the enterprise to better support the customer request. It also ensures that when another worker is dealing with the same customer, the information provided is consistent.

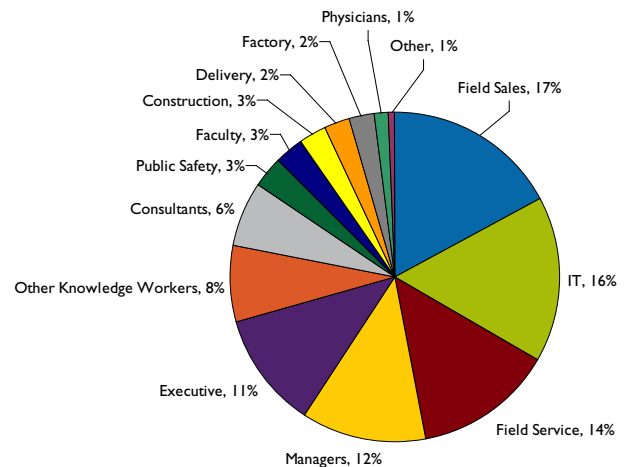
## Foundation for the Future

A final set of benefits for companies choosing to deploy a new architecture for communications is that it drives enterprise agility by accelerating and enhancing UC deployments for the future:

- **A scalable foundation for UC services:** Deploying UC using traditional communications architecture means that the UC services a company chooses to deploy may also be limited to a single location. A new architecture based on Web design would provide an enterprise-wide platform for organizations to deploy UC applications at their own pace.

### Exhibit 4. Mobile Worker Diversity

Source: Anywhere Enterprise—Large: 2008 U.S. Fixed-Mobile Convergence/IP Communications Survey



- **Multivendor integration:** Because the deployment is based on open standards, this architecture allows products from multiple vendors to work together. This enables an organization to choose best-of-breed solutions rather than being locked into one vendor for UC services. For example, a company may choose to use Cisco for network infrastructure, Avaya for communications services, Microsoft for presence, IBM for collaboration and Polycom for video.
- **Faster deployment of UC services:** Because the UC services will be centrally located, then distributed to all workers over the corporate network, users will be given access to these services much faster than with a traditional architecture. This means to deploy any new service, the IT department needs to upgrade or add the new service in one central location to make it available to all users.

- **Rapid response to corporate change:** As companies merge, consolidate or resize, they have to integrate and change applications to meet new workforce needs. This requires both interoperability between existing applications, and the ability to more rapidly provide standard corporate applications to new or relocated workers.
- **Customer service:** One of the important objectives of UC is empowering people and organizations to better serve their customers. An enterprise-wide architecture enables much richer integration between customer-facing locations and the right people and resources to serve them, including knowledge experts, speech and video self-service applications, and back-end contact center agents.
- **Future proof:** As companies look to take advantage of new social networking and Web 2.0 real-time technologies, having a controlled and secure point of connection with service provider or cloud-based network services will make it easier for companies to leverage future market innovations.

Using an architecture based on SIP and Web principles provides the deploying organization an open, standards-based platform that is significantly simpler to build and manage than traditional communications design. This new architecture will allow companies to lower the overall cost of communications, as well as improve the productivity of their workers and the effectiveness of their business.

## IV. What to Look for in a UC Solutions Provider

If corporations are going to unleash the full potential of UC, a new architecture is imperative to create a scalable, manageable foundation for unified communications. However, deciding what solutions provider to use can be difficult. The UC industry has many vendors that tout “end-to-end” or “best-of-breed” solutions, but which one is the right one? The following criteria can be used to help guide any organizations considering UC to make the best decision for their own organization

- **Adherence to industry standards:** No single vendor can provide all elements of a UC solution. This makes adherence to industry standards critical. Although most vendors tout “standards based,” many use proprietary protocols to release products to get to market faster, but ultimately this removes any flexibility from the customer.
- **Open platform:** “Open” is another term that is used by many solution providers. However, many solutions are only open to a limited degree. For example, a solution may provide one or two open interfaces for basic features, but advanced features remain closed to that vendor’s solution only.
- **A long history and experience in communications:** High-quality, real-time communications is not simple, especially over an IP network. A long, successful history in communications, as well as seeking a vendor that has the capabilities to deliver a solution over a global scale, can give customers confidence that the solution will work as promised.
- **A broad set of managed and professional services:** The complexity of UC over a new type of architecture will require enterprises to seek vendors that can help them to navigate this transition. This requires a robust set of professional and managed services around the globe to be a complete solutions provider.
- **Real-time security:** Securing a service that runs over an IP network can be difficult, especially with a real-time service. Any solution must include security that has been built into the solution, not built as an overlay.
- **Robust and highly available solution:** Providing five nines of reliability has historically been table stakes for telephony vendors. Doing this at the IP layer is significantly harder than at layer two. However, as difficult as it is, it needs to be done for the solution to successfully support mission-critical business needs.
- **Multivendor compatibility:** There is no single vendor that can provide every element of a network, telephony infrastructure and unified communications. A vendor that can support a multivendor environment is a must for a robust, scalable solution.
- **Robust ecosystem:** The UC architecture being promoted in this report is built on software. Success in the software space requires an ecosystem surrounding the vendor that not only supports the solution, but also builds on it. One of the measures of long-term success will be a strong ecosystem of application providers that have built vertically oriented software on top of the UC platform.

Obviously there are other standard measuring criteria such as price, performance and other factors, but the criteria listed above are the ones that will be required for long-term leadership in the UC software space.

## V. Conclusions

For most organizations, VoIP and UC are a matter of when, not if. The productivity benefits of UC are undeniable, but the complexity and unknown costs can overwhelm an IT department and eliminate many of the benefits. To combat these problems, UC needs to be thought of as a centrally deployed, standards-based software platform built on loosely coupled services, similar to an organization's Web platform.

Transitioning away from traditional communications architectures and adopting a next-generation architecture will allow companies to incrementally deploy UC without having to do a "rip and replace" of existing investments. Additionally, organizations will be able to create a scalable multivendor environment with the UC services that best align with the corporate business challenges. To get started, Yankee Group recommends the following:

- **Think of UC as a platform, not a product.** When evaluating UC solutions, many customers look only at the specific desktop and telephony functions when choosing a vendor. However, UC should be thought of as a platform to build on and IT departments should look at architecture, integration structure, software communities and other criteria similar to the decision made when choosing a Web platform vendor.
- **Choose a vendor that adopts and supports industry standards such as SIP, SIMPLE and XML.** Almost all vendors will claim that they "follow industry standards" but will build the solution on proprietary extensions to that standard. Challenge vendors to explain which features are delivered as proprietary ones and which ones truly follow industry standards.
- **Establish a UC strategy that best fits your needs.** UC is too complex to be deployed across the organization overnight. Find a department or group of workers that would benefit most from UC. A highly mobile group or distributed team that would benefit from faster collaboration would be ideal. This will help you establish a strategy for ongoing results-focused deployment.
- **Use professional services to guide you through deployment and consider managed services for ongoing support.** When organizations that have implemented either a UC or mobile deployment are asked what they would change if the deployment were done again, most would have used more help up front to redefine operational procedures.

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Prudential Tower  
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BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02199  
617-598-7200 phone  
617-598-7400 fax

### European Headquarters

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LONDON WC1B 4HP  
UNITED KINGDOM  
44-20-7307-1050 phone  
44-20-7323-3747 fax

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