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TOP 5 CHALLENGES IN MODERNIZING UNIFIED COMMUNICATIONS AND COLLABORATION

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The business meeting is not what it used to be. The scene of a group of company executives sitting around a table in a conference room while munching on sandwiches and brainstorming ideas is more like a take from *Mad Men* than a description of how businesses operate today. Even if you update the scene and fill the office with advanced technology such as color-display phones, telepresence or high-end video conferencing systems, it's still clear that there's something wrong with this picture.

The business meeting of today reflects the myriad ways in which collaboration can occur and leverages the technology that has transformed the workplace in the last few years through increased mobility, "always on" business environments, smartphones and tablets and near-ubiquitous Internet connectivity. To adapt to this new reality, business and IT leaders must provide workers with the platforms and tools they need to meet and collaborate successfully.

In this article, we look at five of the most significant challenges in modernizing unified communications and collaboration to obtain all the tools necessary to meet the needs of today's workplace and workforce. We also examine how hosted services delivered by communications service providers can help organizations deploy cost-effective and easy-to-use technology that is transforming the nature of the business meeting for today and tomorrow.

CHALLENGE #1: EASE OF USE

Today's meetings, whether one-to-one or with a large group, need to accommodate workers using any device from any location, while providing voice and video conferencing, application and document sharing, and collaboration capabilities that ensure a high-quality experience for the user.

Importantly, the technology enabling today's meetings must also be easy to install and intuitive to set up and use. It must "just work" without any hassle, supporting the different ways that users want to interact with one another. If the solution for unified communications and collaboration is not simple to use and does not deliver a satisfying user experience, the organization will be exposed to additional risk, including:

- Lack of user adoption: The most sophisticated and elaborate UC platform is of little value if employees are not fully using it. Workers will avoid unwelcoming, complex systems or mobile applications that don't fit their needs, so the organization will not reap the benefits of its investment.

- Reduced Productivity: In addition, productivity will suffer if users aren't easily accessing the tools they need to collaborate. If the company doesn't provide a solution as easy to use and intuitive as the consumer services they may be utilizing, workers may turn to actual consumer "over-the-top" solutions, which not only lack the security features needed to protect the organization, but also limit collaboration because these solutions don't provide the levels of quality or reliability that businesses require, nor do they provide a comprehensive complement of collaboration tools such as co-annotation of shared documents and remote screen control.

By integrating a hosted-based model for unified communications into a broader suite of video conferencing and meetings, organizations can successfully address the ease-of-use challenge. Users can quickly and easily set presence status and view that of their colleagues; chat one-on-one or with groups; and participate in hosted video conferencing, simple online meetings, and group messaging all within a single interface that has a minimal learning curve. Importantly, they can do this on any device, from any location, accessing a full set of unified communications and collaboration tools.
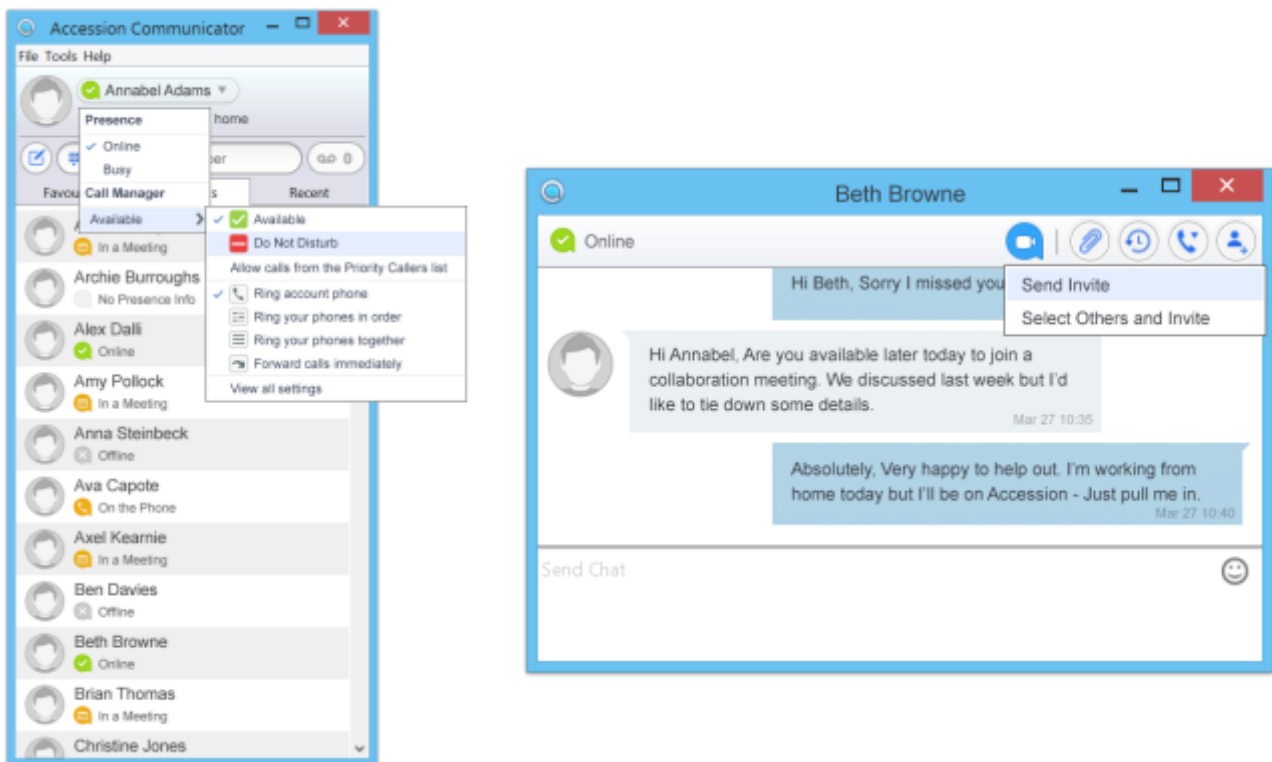
Accession Communicator for Desktop

CHALLENGE #2: EASE OF DEPLOYMENT

Legacy platforms present an ongoing challenge for the IT organization. Not only are they expensive, they are complex to manage, requiring trained personnel and often maintenance contracts with vendors. In addition, the equipment has a limited lifecycle, so there are ongoing challenges involved in upgrades, scaling and procurement.

Another deployment challenge with legacy platforms is that they don't easily support mobile and remote workers using smartphones and tablets. Allowing workers use consumer-grade solutions is not an answer because that would mean the IT department would be giving up control, thereby creating more security risks.

A hosted service is easy to deploy for the IT organization. Once your organization signs-up for the service, there is no equipment to install and no maintenance. With the right hosted service, you can also leverage both on-premises and hybrid hosted solutions. For examples, Metaswitch's Accession Hosted UC and Collaboration solution enables businesses to integrate with legacy PBXs and conference room systems with a hosted service to enable your remote and mobile workers with effective collaboration across the enterprise.

CHALLENGE #3: LOWERING TCO

Businesses of all sizes are constantly seeking to do more while spending less. Companies moving to a hosted model for unified communications and collaboration have experienced overall cost reductions of 80 percent or more, through lower capital expenditures (capex) and lower operating expenditures (opex).

With a hosted model, businesses pay for a subscription based on the number of users who can utilize the service across multiple corporate-issued devices or options they own such as smartphones or tablets.

In addition to the capex and opex savings from using a hosted system, the organization will achieve other TCO benefits, including reduced travel expenses because workers will be able to easily participate in meetings from any location; improved productivity through increased and more effective collaboration; and investment protection, as a hosted service does not incur costs for ongoing upgrades or ultimately a replacement when a premise-based system grows obsolete.

CHALLENGE #4: SUPPORTING MOBILITY AND A BROAD MIX OF DEVICES

Most legacy phone systems and video conferencing platforms were designed prior to the mobile era, and legacy, premises-centric enterprise vendors have been slow to adjust to the changing needs of the workplace. It has been the province of suppliers like Metaswitch to build software-based unified communications and collaboration solutions for service providers with mobility in mind. Mobility is simpler to deliver and support in the hosted environment, and hosted-based solutions offer the broadest range of mobile features on the widest range of devices for the highest-quality mobile user experience.

For example, participants can use Mac, Windows, IOS and Android-based devices to access a service provider's hosted unified communications and collaboration service with an integrated experience across desktop, tablet and mobile devices. In addition, mobile users can easily take advantage of mobile applications that offer a range of collaboration features -- from voice calling to messaging, which can be seamlessly up-lifted to video collaboration with screen sharing, remote control, group messaging, co-annotation and tablet whiteboarding. Users can even screen-share IOS apps – a unique feature.

Accession Meeting with screen-sharing

CHALLENGE #5: FINDING THE RIGHT PROVIDER

When evaluating options and choosing a provider, businesses will want to consider the following:

- A supplier's experience with managing networks: Hosted models require high-quality, managed broadband networks. Suppliers who can supply both the software applications and the network connectivity to those applications can better guarantee the quality of experience and prevent finger-pointing if issues arise.

- Support for mobile workers and mixed devices: Your solution should support the changing workplace, enabling employees to easily use and access real-time communications like video and instant messaging on any device from any location.

- A comprehensive, integrated and easy-to-use set of features. Users on any device and at any location should have access to the same set of feature-rich voice and collaboration tools, including messaging, presence, screen sharing and multi-party video rather than using multiple, disparate applications that are difficult to manage for both users and IT management.

- High quality, reliability and security: Communications, particularly real-time, is mission-critical, so you need solutions that offer the highest levels of quality, reliability and security.

- TCO: You should be looking at solutions that offer cost savings over on-premises solution. In moving to a hosted service, with a user-based subscription model, businesses can scale flexibly and have a predictable cost structure as deployment needs change.

ACCESSION FROM METASWITCH

Metaswitch enables communications service providers to meet these challenges with complete and innovative hosted unified communications and collaborations software for business customers. Its hosted unified communications solution, Accession and Accession Meeting (powered by Zoom), enables network operators to modernize their enterprise customers' communications experience while delivering a much more cost-effective yet highly scalable and quality solution.

Accession meets the needs of the demanding, tech-savvy and always-on enterprise workforce. Its fully featured UC capabilities include voice, instant messaging, presence and visual voicemail with speech-to-text transcription and video and web conferencing – supporting up to 200 attendees and webinars supporting up to 10,000. Its user-centric design makes it easy for end users to install and use, and simple for providers to deploy and support.

CONCLUSION

Innovations in technology over the past few years have had a dramatic impact on the way we work. Employees are no longer tethered to desks or offices and can be even more productive when they are remote or mobile. Yet they still need to collaborate, still need to see fellow workers and business partners and still need to conduct productive business meetings that move the company forward.

Hosted-based services delivered by communications service providers offer a cost-effective, easy-to-use and simple-to-deploy model for empowering the modern business meeting with video, mobility, and a comprehensive palette of advanced collaboration tools. For more information on how you can deliver these services to your business customers, visit us at metaswitch.com.