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PARTNER'S GUIDE TO UCaaS

The value of Unified Communications as a Service is becoming apparent even to customers who weren't interested before. Here are 14 reasons the approach might be a fit for SMB customers.

By Scott Bekker

PARTNERS IN THE MICROSOFT ECOSYSTEM have been hearing about the opportunities around Unified Communications (UC) for more than a decade. Microsoft has chased that field with a succession of somewhat evolutionary products from Office Communications Server to Lync to, now, Skype for Business and Teams. For some partners, UC has been a great business. Those with telephony expertise and datacenter architecture know-how have found a great niche. Because of the scale, complexity and cost of engagements, UC hasn't seen broad adoption, though.

The parallel emergence of the cloud is changing that and democratizing UC technology. The variation on Software as a Service (SaaS) known as Unified Communications as a Service (UCaaS) is becoming popular, both supplanting on-premises UC solutions, but importantly also threatening to spread well beyond UC's current installed base. Intriguingly for channel partners, whose customer base tends toward the small to midsize business (SMB) side of the market, UCaaS is even starting to appeal to those budget-conscious customers.

What follows are 14 key selling points for UCaaS that partners are using to add major UCaaS components to customer deals.

1. Convert CapEx to OpEx. The advantage of paying for a service out of operating expenditures on a monthly basis versus investing up front in a capital expenditure of hardware, software and services is a well-established advantage of the SaaS model. UCaaS actually presents one of the best business

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cases for the SaaS-oriented OpEx approach, due to the often-high startup costs of UC projects. Being able to connect to a provider's infrastructure and paying on a per-seat basis can make a project worth considering rather than something that cost-conscious customers reject out of hand.

2. Scale Consumption. A corollary in SaaS of the OpEx approach is the ability to add or remove seats on a monthly basis based on how many employees need access to the system. One of the major contributors to the cost of on-premises UC systems was the need to build in excess capacity to account for potential future growth. With a UCaaS setup, organizations can add seats if they grow, and drop seats if the business hits a rough patch.

3. Externalize IT Management. Every major IT system hosted on-premises comes with the need for IT staff to maintain it. While that's not a concern for small businesses, which simply wouldn't consider a major UC system in most cases, midsize customers often did need dedicated IT staff to maintain their UC implementations. With a UCaaS solution, customers skittish about the strain a UC solution might put on their IT department don't need to worry about it. The UCaaS services provider manages, patches and otherwise maintains the UC services, often in a public cloud, like Amazon Web Services (AWS) or Microsoft Azure.

4. Get Professional-Grade Security and Compliance. One other advantage in UCaaS that's common to SaaS solutions generally is security and compliance. Internally hosted systems have to be properly configured for security, and in highly regulated industries, the systems must be compliant. Those processes are handled at the major UCaaS providers by subject-matter experts, who boast levels of expertise that even most enterprises would struggle to match.

5. Drive Down UC Capabilities into the SMB. All of these selling points are general SaaS advantages with a UC twist. Getting specific to UC, most UCaaS solutions can bring a full range of sophisticated UC capabilities into SMB environments that those customers wouldn't be able to otherwise afford. Analysts at Gartner Inc. define UC as including six functions: voice and telephony, including mobility; meeting solutions; messaging, including e-mail with voicemail and unified messaging; presence and instant messaging; desktop and thin-browser clients; and communication-enabled applications. Almost all of those functions were out of the budgetary reach of most small businesses and even midsize clients prior to the emergence of UCaaS.

6. Bring on the Video. Speaking of previously unattainable capabilities, many UCaaS solutions allow for various types of video communication, from one-on-one video calls to group meetings with video to external presentations. As one example, Microsoft Teams live events and the Skype Meeting Broadcast feature both support meetings with an audience size of up to 10,000 attendees.

7. Improve Productivity with Integrated Applications. By making the communications system part of the IT infrastructure, partners can help their customers integrate all types of solutions. Microsoft regularly demonstrates the integrated capabilities of the Office 365 stack, with workflows seamlessly integrating calls with e-mails, presence, instant messaging, Word and Excel documents, and other Teams or Skype for Business features. Those Microsoft integrations, while sophisticated, are only a starting point. Creating workflows that integrate the communication with line-of-business applications, such as customer relationship management systems, is where incredible amounts of productivity value can be unlocked.

8. Integrate Sales and Support. Perhaps the most transformative aspect of a UCaaS solution is the ability to hook communications into the sales process. When incoming requests are flagged and farmed out to inbound sales professionals, who can respond through whatever communication method the potential customer prefers, a business can become much better at converting interest into sales. The same applies to customer support. The UCaaS

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system can be a springboard to fast and effective problem resolution for existing customers.

9. Track Usage. One aspect of UCaaS solutions that's been improving across the industry recently is the quality of dashboarding and administration. More and more systems are making it easy to see how much usage the system is getting, and organizations can even use metrics from their UCaaS system to evaluate employee efficiency and time management.

10. Ease into UCaaS. Another advantage of UCaaS is that the capabilities can be added incrementally. Partners with customers on Office 365 can give small groups a fully functional pilot that wouldn't have been possible for an on-premises UC solution (because the whole UC setup—servers, software, cabling and all—would've had to be installed to enable the features). Other customers can use certain UCaaS features without going to a full cloud PBX environment, and then add in the phone lines later when they're ready for them. Due to the almost negligible up-front cost of a few monthly users, UCaaS is dramatically easier and cheaper to pilot or ease into than comparable UC solutions. Meanwhile, piloting telephony service for a few key users will answer the questions about call quality that only time on a headset can address.

11. Support BYOD/Mobile/Remote. A highlight of a UCaaS solution is the ability for users to take much of the corporate campus desktop UC experience with them wherever they go. Key constituencies include users who are out of their office and connecting to a call or meeting with a mobile phone, as well as remote workers in home or branch offices. Most UCaaS solutions offer the same experience to the remote worker as the employee in the main office. While the mobile experience is necessarily deprecated slightly by the form factor, it can still be much richer than simply calling in to a voice meeting. UCaaS also has the potential to be a strong option for organizations with a bring-your-own-device (BYOD) environment.

12. Improve the Organization's Disaster Readiness. Most discussions of business continuity and disaster recovery involve backup and recovery, virtualization, and redundant operations. Often left out of the conversation is the communications backbone. Yet workers' ability to communicate from wherever they are can be a crucial component of a disaster response plan. If a hurricane swamps the office and forces employees to work from home for a month during repairs, an existing UCaaS solution means the communication infrastructure is hosted with Microsoft or Amazon or Google and will help keep the organization humming for as long as necessary.

13. Get One Throat to Choke. A challenge with traditional UC went along with the complexity of the solutions. If something didn't work, was it the integrator who was at fault? Was the problem with the phone lines? Was the software causing the problem, the OS or could it be the server? An IT customer could spend considerable time calling around to various vendors and end up with no answers but a lot of finger pointing. With a UCaaS solution, all of the pieces are in on place, leaving the customer with only one support number.

14. Engage in a Little Future-Proofing. With UC becoming ubiquitous and UCaaS becoming the preferred method for UC delivery, more and more software applications and cloud services are using UCaaS APIs as a development target. There are a lot of high-productivity, add-on solutions available already for UCaaS users today. The availability of great apps built to leverage UCaaS should only increase. Customers who are using UCaaS will be ready to take advantage when the next great application comes out. •

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