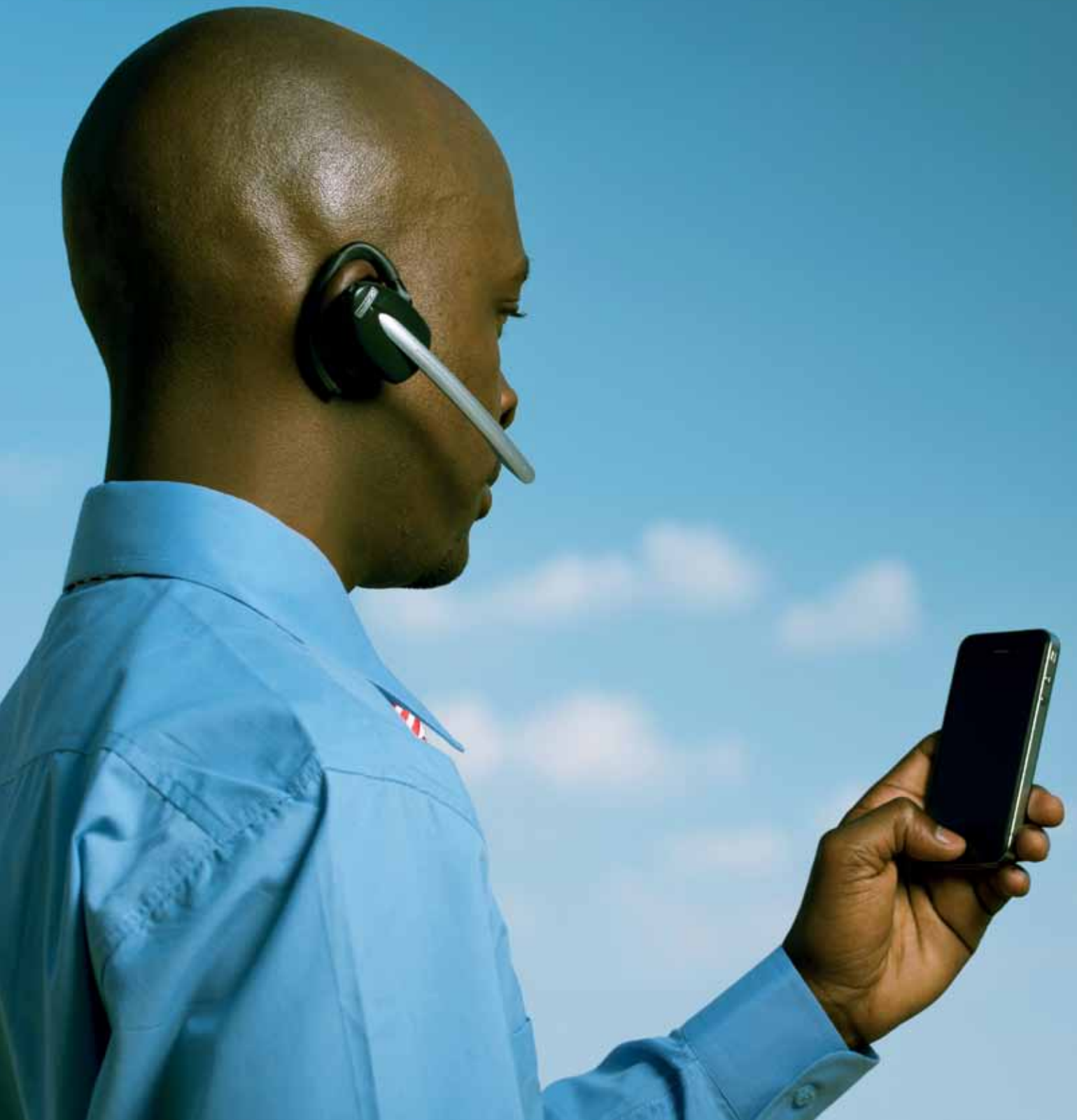


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Ride the Unified Wave



Everyone is talking about the next wave of office collaboration, yet successful implementations of unified communications don't just happen. What important lessons have been learnt by organisations that have made a start down the unified communications path?

Integrated collaboration, unified communication

Unified communications is not a technology or product that you can buy off the shelf. It's an experience. It leverages your existing investments, whether they be telephony, e-mail, directory services, video conferencing, amongst others, and offers up a united experience on a single interface.

The cornerstones of a unified communications experience are identity and presence. Identity provides a single identification mechanism irrespective of which communication device is being used and presence helps us manage and optimise the most appropriate form of communication. These two integration technologies ensure that the same person is not represented multiple times (if an individual is using multiple devices) leaving us unsure of who is the right 'John Smith', and will allow us to determine how to communicate with him based on his current (realtime) circumstances or presence status.

Consider the following scenarios:

- A CEO needs to attend a video conference from a hotel room at short notice. Rather than track down the concierge to book a video conferencing facility, he attends the call using his 3G video phone.
- A team member has to contribute to a proposal and opens the document in the Microsoft® SharePoint portal. As she edits the document, she can see a list of her fellow team members' names down the right hand side of the document and their presence status. She can initiate an instant message (IM), make a telephone call (click-to-call), begin a video conferencing session, send an e-mail and view her colleagues' Microsoft® Outlook calendar free-busy time, thus encouraging and simplifying the exercise of collaboration.

It's estimated that information workers spend on average about 30 minutes per week in phone tag. So in a large organisation with 10,000 employees, each of whom spends 30 minutes per week chasing colleagues, plenty of time is being wasted. Thanks to the power of presence, information workers can make more informed decisions as to how to contact a person thus not wasting time and making fruitless out of network calls.

Organisations that are already some way down the unified communication road have some valuable insights that those just beginning on their journey would be wise to heed, ie:

- Thoroughly investigate your organisation's existing environment
- Ensure that the existing environment can support and integrate with unified collaboration or communication components, such as Microsoft® Exchange Server 2010, which is very reliant on the Microsoft infrastructure. Microsoft® Exchange Server 2010 includes unified messaging components, which depend heavily on directory services. If the directory services are not set up or configured according to best practice, you run the risk of performance issues when it comes to messaging.

The secret is to configure the existing Microsoft infrastructure according to best practice and to ensure that it is fit for purpose before unified communications is deployed.

Don't lose sight of the complexity of the deployment. Rolling out a unified communications solution is not as simple as installing a couple of servers. The complexity around unifying communications lies in the integration of different systems: telephony, video conferencing, desktop applications, including e-mail, calendaring and directory services. For this reason it is well worth considering enlisting the expertise of an integration technology partner to ensure your deployment doesn't veer off course.

Unified communications also includes the unified mailbox. With Microsoft® Exchange Server 2007 and 2010, it is now possible for information workers to receive voicemails and faxes in their inboxes or e-mail. These messages can be retrieved directly from e-mail or by calling in from a

mobile phone or from an office phone, and using the voice access functionality.

Users would, in other words, be able to speak to their voicemail system and say 'calendar for today', 'voicemail' or 'e-mail'. The voicemail system would then be able to communicate what the user's appointments are for the day, voicemail messages or list their e-mail. Traditionally, a MCSE type of professional would be able to deploy Microsoft® Exchange. However, the functionality in the latest Microsoft® Exchange version touches the telephony system which means that you need additional skills to implement the messaging system.

Knock-on effects

A crucial aspect with the deployment of unified communications in an organisation is to understand how it will affect different environments. Unified communications deployments touch a myriad of systems and environments, e.g. telephony, video conferencing, directory services and network. This means that implementation of unified communications solutions can and should not take place without rigorous planning, especially around the existing infrastructure. For example, capacity planning of the network and telephony system is critical as there may be insufficient bandwidth for the required unified communications functionality, or the existing telephony system may be running at full capacity currently and will buckle under the additional unified communications load.

Educate end users

Don't forget your end-users – after all, they are the ones whose productivity you're aiming to boost through access to these new tools. Proactive and comprehensive training is essential.

The introduction of real-time presence status, also means that users need to understand unified communication etiquette. For example, users will need to populate their calendars with appointments so that the Microsoft® Lync™ Server can pull information to communicate the presence status of the users when they are in meetings.

If not, their status will simply display as 'Online' and their colleagues will not be able to communicate with them in the appropriate manner.

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