UNIFIED COMMUNICATIONS, THE INDUSTRY LANDSCAPE

From where I see it ☺

"Unified Communications" is one of the hottest buzzwords in the communications industry as vendors and distributors are looking to excite end-users on how this technology will change the way business communicates and competes. Being aggressively pushed by noted heavy weights like Microsoft and Cisco as a MUST HAVE technology, not simply a "cool technology," Cisco, Microsoft and several small players like us (Esnatech) and AVST have all got the UC stuff. What we see on the horizon are new vendors looking at it, and determining how they can take advantage of the "hype." Apple and Google are on the sidelines looking in, but more strategically looking at how to get in BIG.

UC still seems unclear and hard to position with end-users, as every vendor has their own definition of what this MUST HAVE technology is based on and what they're trying to sell. Really, UC is not a product, but more of a process that can vary, depending on who is using it and how their particular business processes workflow. UC ranges from a simple definition of using the same network for voice, video, and data and for mobile users it really boils down to, using the same device for all forms of communication. For many vendors trying to push large bandwidth and expensive devices, UC is more defined as an amalgamation of voice, video and text – a seamless flow of communications. However, in the end, it's about unifying your core business processes so you can automate simple non-critical tasks and increase the flow of communication to live resources at critical stages in order to ease decision-making and streamline your business process. Finally, a wealth of other definitions is also correct as they address a specific customer or users' need to unify some form of communication.

Because of all the different types of interpretations based on vendor marketing, unified communications is truly in danger of becoming an industry "buzzword" instead of an industry changing technology. Like many other BIG marketing terms such as Web 2.0 and Going Green, these definitions can be changed to suit an immediate purpose. From a vendor and UC VAR perspective this is good, simply position yourself as a leader in UC and you're a leader in just about everything related to UC, Voice, IM, Presence, Mobility, Video, Collaboration, etc…

What is amazing, in my opinion – is that TRUE unifying of communication access has been around for many years, from several independent vendors like us (Esnatech), AVST, and Interactive Intelligence who truly offer UC solutions that have NO dependencies like specific phone systems, e-mail or business applications. We, for the last 15 years have truly been unifying business infrastructure to streamline the way a business communicates. Now the big boys enter in the last couple of years and talk about this "NEW" technology but with a caveat, it has to be their stuff! IBM, Microsoft, Cisco all promote open technology as long as the core of it is their stuff! Microsoft launched their UC suite, which is excellent, as long as all your core applications and devices are all Microsoft. Lotus has similar functionality, but with no clear marketing direction. GroupWise is also in this space, but weak on voice communications and direction. Outside of Microsoft, the major voice players making UC noise are Cisco, Avaya, Nortel and Siemens.

The real interesting part of all the vendor solutions is the lack of a unified portfolio. While communication is starting to flow over a single channel, the user experience is still very fragmented. Many solutions with lots of overhead all linked together with middleware (you hope). Even Apple has moved into the UC arena with Mobile Me (Apple has existing patents on the iPhone to enable video conferencing). They promote Mobile Me as “Exchange for the rest of us.” The line between enterprise and consumer is going to blur whether enterprise companies want it or not. As good as it is with single identity, Mobile Me is not open, like everything else from Apple it’s closed and controlled and this may hurt their enterprise penetration. Microsoft Exchange is also tightly controlled, with crazy fragmented and expensive licensing. This is opening the door for new and hungry competitors to attack their market dominion.

Google is a real threat, if they can ever market Google applications properly. They certainly have the solid base of a UC product line. With a Google account I can now get e-mail, chat, instant message and voice chat, while tying it in with applications from Esnatech to link my mobile phone and office PBX to the hosted UC service, giving them opportunity to penetrate the enterprise.

UC is completely disjointed at the enterprise level, Microsoft is pushing the desktop and everyone else is pushing devices and infrastructure.

The real question I think is, whose vision is the most ambitious and in alignment with the future? I have big doubts about Microsoft, they’re stuck trying to defend the desktop, which is a losing proposition in the long run. I’m just speculating about what Google is doing, but it has huge potential. Then you have a variety of Telecom vendors that are so voice-focused they’ve lost sight of what unification really is. Let us not forget the Groupware vendors trying to re-invent themselves and breathe new life by re-branding themselves as UC, such as Lotus, Oracle and GroupWise. The reality is, UC means many things to many people, and the winner cannot be decided for a while, this means that tremendous opportunities are viable for other vendors and application middleware (Esnatech Telephony Office-LinX) that truly link infrastructure to applications and remain detached from the environment.

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