

TECHNOLOGY

cut the stress out of your IT



Unified Communications is a term that is being used a lot in the world of business – but what does it actually mean? Put simply, it brings together telephones and the IT network, offering greater flexibility in the way telecommunications work for the company, in turn improving efficiency and offering better customer service to clients, writes Robert May, managing director of IT consultancy ramsac.

Streamlining the telephone

In tough economic times there is an ever-growing emphasis on the need for effective business communications and the need to be competitive, so it makes perfect sense to integrate the two key office tools to provide a streamlined communications system.

Traditional 'phone systems have their limitations – you have a different number for each phone you may use – your mobile, desk phone, meeting room phone and home office phone. Dialling a number

from your Outlook contacts, customer or supplier database is a manual process of copying the number from the screen onto your phone, and there's no way to see if a colleague is available until you've tried various different numbers.

Unified communications improves efficiency by reducing time it takes to make a call, and the number of failed attempts at contacting a colleague. The system knows where the person you're trying to contact is, and you can see on your PC or phone if they are available to take your call, plus you can dial directly from your Outlook contacts or even your client database. Customer service is improved by allowing you to deal with incoming calls more quickly and efficiently, even popping up a client record before you've picked up the phone.

The unified communications system is tightly linked to Outlook, so from my diary entries it knows where I am, and how I would like to handle calls. If I'm working from home I'd like my extension to be re-directed to my home office number. If I'm in an internal meeting any calls should go straight to my voicemail, although I may choose to be disturbed if it's a call from an important client. As soon as my mobile phone connects to the hands-free kit in my car, the system can automatically re-route calls thorough to my mobile. I can see on my PC or phone the status of any of my colleagues, so I know if they are already on a call, if they are in a meeting, away from their desk, or available. This eliminates 'telephone tag', where voicemails and missed calls bounce back and forth, sometimes for days.

Unified communications is designed to streamline the telephone system, capitalising on the strengths of a traditional phone systems, but with the benefits of IT communications. It is also designed to ensure your clients get the best service when they call you, which is vital for client retention. The benefits of adopting any new technology should always be weighed against the cost, but for many businesses unified communications can offer valuable flexibility to their business telecoms.