VOIP AND UNIFIED COMMUNICATIONS:

WHAT ARE THEY AND WHICH IS BEST?

Wondering about the latest communication models out there for businesses? Two communications tools you may have heard of are Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and Unified Communications (UC). Sometimes the terms are used interchangeably, but that really isn't correct. In this e-guide we will discuss what defines each of these communication tools and what may be best for you.

VoIP is a pretty straightforward technology that you may have already integrated into your business systems. For well over a hundred years voice communication has been handled by the PSTN (Public Switched Telephone Network). Voice was transported over copper wires, then newer materials, but the basics remained the same. Telephone signals (voice communication) were transported over public wires. With the rise of the Internet and availability of broadband connections, an alternative technology developed to transport voice communications. Now, your voice "signal" can be transferred into a digital signal and then sent out over the internet to its final destination.

In the office and commercial environment, in-house Private Branch Exchanges (PBX) were on-site internal telephony systems that switched calls to individual users' desks. A PBX allowed additional features such as 3-way calling and conferencing, and eliminated the need to lease a separate line for every single telephone in the office; since every line is never simultaneously in use, this cut down on fixed telephony costs. With VoIP, the PBX is replaced with an Internet version and voice calls are shipped out over the Internet.

VoIP systems also offer the same PBX services business users expect, such as call forwarding, call waiting, voicemail and caller ID. VoIP systems, since they run over the Internet and not a separate switched network, can start "talking" with some of our other communications tools. As a result, VoIP can offer instant messaging services, easier video calls, and voicemail-to-email translation. This last feature allows a voice caller to leave you a voicemail, which can then be transcribed into an email and sent to your inbox.

If you haven't already done so, it is likely you will eventually shift over to VoIP technology and abandon your PBX. At some point your present PBX will reach the end of its expected life cycle, and the lack of available parts will force you into VoIP technology. However, there are several advantages to VoIP that may encourage you to make the switch sooner. For instance,

1) Moving phones and numbers to different desks, and configuring for new or exiting employees is dramatically easier and cheaper than with a PBX
2) VoIP is much more flexible and customer friendly in the call center environment
3) Voice conference calls are easier and of better quality than on a traditional PBX. They are also less expensive than using an outside provider
4) The ease of forwarding to mobile devices is a part of good disaster recovery planning
5) You will see a significant drop in per-minute telco costs (but not a complete elimination)
6) A VoIP installation provides a good jumping off point if you choose to transition to a more complete UC environment

As an aside, it is important to recognize we are referring to business-grade VoIP packages, not consumer-style applications such as Vonage or Skype.

What Is Unified Communications?

Unlike VoIP, UC is not really a technology as much as it is a marketing term. In general, UC refers to a collection of tools or applications that are designed to work together to simplify communications for professionals who utilize multiple communication modes from multiple locations. Examples include email, text, mobile and desk phones for voice, and video conferencing. And while VoIP as a stand-alone isn't generally considered UC, UC doesn't exist without VoIP. VoIP is considered the foundation for creating a UC model. Features of UC include the range of optional services noted above that can be part of a VoIP package, as well as others. Examples include

- Speech recognition
- Video conferencing
- Screen sharing
- Call control
- SMS
- Email
- Voicemail
- Internet telephony (VoIP)
- Instant messaging
- Screen sharing

As we noted, UC tends to be a marketing term, because there isn't a standard package that is understood by all to be UC. The feature list is dependent upon the vendor you select. Different vendors will have a different range of available services.

When to choose just a VoIP system?

Choosing to go down the path of VoIP is generally driven by a desire to save money on telco charges, and the transition is a painless one. While it does require some investment, it is generally not a bank breaker, especially if your PBX is reaching the end of its usefulness. It also provides additional convenience because of its flexibility and ability to provide for users working remotely on multiple devices. If that is about all you need at this point, VoIP may be enough.

When to go UC?

First, it is important to think strategically. Because you may someday wish to build out a UC model, it is wise to select a VoIP service provider who also specializes in UC. This will facilitate an easier transition. That said, the key characteristic about UC is that it is all about the user experience. With UC, you are making it possible to use multiple modes of communication on multiple platforms and transfer between them without disruption, all from a single user app. UC is a strategic business decision whereas VoIP is a bit more cost driven and utilitarian.

There are other specific reasons to transition to a UC environment. The call center is an obvious one. UC can transform a multiple channel communication center into an omni-channel one, to the obvious benefit of your customers. The increased level of ease-of-use found in the omni-channel model is critical to meeting the expectations of users, especially younger ones.

Beyond that, it is all about productivity and collaboration. The more your employees and clients can interact on whichever communication tool is most convenient at any specific time, the more productive they can become.

In summary, VoIP and UC exist on a bit of a continuum. Starting out with a basic VoIP telephony system, then moving to the additional features made possible in the VoIP model, and finally along to the full array of communication and productivity tools available for creating a single user platform that can also integrate with your CRM.

Last tip: Be sure to investigate the features available from different vendors of UC systems, and be careful to select a VoIP service provider who also offers UC services. So when that time comes, the move will be as smooth as possible.