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Affordable Unified Communications through Managed Services

According to Nemertes Research, 92% of IT executives list real-time communication tools such as Presence Technology (one of the primary components of Unified Communications) as one of the factors that help them to manage their remote workforce. Unified Communications is the personal agent of the individual user, where employees don't have to be in the office or logged onto a computer to receive phone calls or access e-mail. It's an opportunity for real performance increases in staff that interact frequently with customers, or that collaborate with internal and/or external groups.

And now Unified Communication is affordable—even for small-to-medium businesses—through the proper application of a "managed services" approach. A managed services model can in fact deliver access to a wide range of comprehensive phone capabilities and features. But there are some potential pitfalls that must be avoided in order to realize these benefits. In that light, it's helpful to understand the different types of managed services models that are available.

"Full-Service" Managed Services

With full-service managed services, a vendor will arrive onsite at the customer's location with all of the equipment needed for a complete telephony solution. The system will be maintained by the vendor's own employees directly onsite, enabling the customer to leverage outside expertise. Generally, all communications needs for the client company are bundled into one package with this approach. The customer simply pays a monthly fee for the service.

The problem is that full-service managed services tend to be an expensive option. It is normally employed by larger corporations with significant operating capital, and can be cost prohibitive for small to medium sized businesses.

Hosted Managed Services

When managed services are provided in a hosted environment, there is no equipment or external staff present at the customer's location. The only hardware needed are the actual phones that plug into the customer's existing data network. From there, all call processing and applications are accessed over the Internet.

While it can be an attractive alternative, this technology has not been fully developed. The companies offering this type of service tend to be highly leveraged and often unstable from a financial perspective. This is coupled with the fact that there are still some quality and reliability problems with hosted managed services. Pricing can also be an issue, as it is common to find ambiguous charges for ill-defined services using this approach.



SaaS Managed Services

Software as a Service (SaaS) is a model where a business uses their own hardware operating at their location, but they access all necessary back-office software through a SaaS provider (Google™ Apps is a good example of this). This provides two advantages: #1-This process is much more reliable, with solid call quality on premise based voice communications infrastructure. #2-SaaS is a very affordable approach for small-to-medium enterprises since Microsoft® Exchange Server is not required for Google™ Apps.

For companies that are not using an Exchange server for their data network, the investment needed will typically be \$5,000-\$10,000 for Microsoft® Exchange Server. In order to use the advanced features of the premise based telephony solution, an Exchange Server would be required. Using a SaaS hosted provider like Google Apps would eliminate the need for an Exchange Server and all of the costs associated with its maintenance. Through a SaaS approach like Google Apps, a company typically pays about \$50 per user per year to facilitate advanced features like presence, mobility and unified communications, making this an ideal solution for businesses with 5-20 employees.

And what do you get by using this type of solution? You gain access to a comprehensive phone system, including voicemail and faxing capabilities. You can also deploy a complete Unified Communications system, including the latest Presence Management features such as Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR), Auto Attendant, Text-to-Speech (TTS) applications, Find Me/Follow Me and more. And a quality SaaS provider such as Google™ Apps will also allow your business to run applications, such as Microsoft Outlook®, Microsoft Excel®, Microsoft Power Point® and Microsoft Word®.

Managed services could be an attractive option for the small-to-medium business (SMB). And it looks like the SaaS model will be the dominant approach for SMBs in the foreseeable future. It's the right combination of ease of deployment, ease of use and price that make it the most attractive option for this size of organization.