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publishers

Building Business Productivity with  
Unified Communications  
The Essentials Series

# The Power of Convergence in Business Communications

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by **Don Jones, Series Editor**

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Don Jones

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# The Power of Convergence in Business Communications

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The concepts behind the convergence of voice and data networks aren't new. Convergence represents an ideal that businesses of all sizes have been working toward for many years. Not all business networks have fully integrated the whole range of business services yet, but it's a vital focus for many organizations. Businesses ranging in size from small operations to global enterprises are deploying both Voice over IP (VoIP) and broader unified communications and collaboration (UCC) to reduce operating expenses, increase productivity, and capitalize on competitive advantage.

This article will identify why convergence to a unified communications solution set matters to every business and how integrating business voice and data services in the network can deliver compelling advantages. It will also explore briefly how unified communications solutions can not only meet the business needs of today but also create the foundation for communications technologies that are just emerging. Unified communications doesn't just help solve today's problems—it helps future-proof sustainability by leveraging business investments in technology.

## Why Convergence Matters to Every Business

The convergence evolution has been underway for many years. What began as the consolidation of voice and data circuits for cost savings has become a robust integration of services that brings value beyond reducing expense. Convergence integrates data and voice services to increase operational efficiency, reduce operating costs, and streamline business processes and workflows.

Business communications fall into three categories:

- Person-to-person communications involve people talking to other people. These conversations take place in real-time.
- Person-to-system communications often use a Web browser. They're made up of queries, searches, order placements, and other transactions. These "conversations" occur in near-real-time.
- System-to-system communications take place behind the scenes between computer systems. They might be batch processes, distributed searches, database updates, or some other activity. These communications might take place based on a person-initiated trigger or as scheduled processes.

Convergence integrates all the business resources into a robust communications service that enables a company's staff to communicate more effectively with each other, customers, business partners, and suppliers. This efficiency can reduce cost, improve collaboration, streamline operations, and might provide a competitive advantage to increase the bottom-line profitability.

### Reduced Operating Expense

Voice and data services are critical components of all business resources today. The business telephone system and computer networks are expensive resources far beyond the initial investment in hardware. The initial capital outlay requires ongoing operational support to leverage the best value from the company's investment.

A converged solution can eliminate the technical support staff for voice and data. It provides a single bill for reduced administration. Simplifying the complexity of services onto a single infrastructure provides a cost-effective approach to managing the information and communications resources of the company and provides greater control over operations expenses.

### Increased Productivity through Integration

Integrating voice and data into a single solution set can increase employees' productivity. A converged unified communications solution makes all the corporate resources readily available to employees and, in some cases, directly to customers.

Unified communications technologies have delivered business improvements in many ways. Many business processes are fueled by information rather than manufactured products or durable goods. Business is based on the delivery of information or other information-based transactions. Productivity improvements are driven through tightly integrating company technologies.

Consider the retail industry and the trend toward self-service. In many stores, we find a self-service checkout, where we scan and bag our own purchases. We have the tools we need to manage our own transactions without any assistance. Consumer retailers know that this approach reduces the need for staff.

In business, self-service is simply the integration of resources in a way that lets employees and staff do more for themselves from a centralized point of access. The unified communications integration of voice and data simplify getting the job done. This increased productivity directly feeds the bottom line.

### Setting the Stage for the Future

As consumers and employees, we use information technology every day. We use the Web to buy goods, for entertainment, and to communicate with family, friends, colleagues, and customers. VoIP has integrated voice communications into our computer use.

Current trends toward cloud computing further unify our communications resources. As voice and data converge, with increasing use of video, instant messaging, and collaboration tools, we're seeing a rise in *Communications Enhanced Business Processes* (CEBP). Unified communications solutions of the day couple the computerized systems into convergence with voice services. As these technologies evolve, our daily business processes and company workflows are being enhanced to deliver more efficiency and create new services. Just as VoIP provides a foundation for unified communications solutions, UCC provides the foundation for the next generation of information technologies.

## Why Integrated IP Solutions Matter

Convergence, or integration, began as a cost-savings concept, but it has become a standard set of business operating principles. For most companies, technology solutions are implemented to support the core business. Many companies began with separate voice and data systems. Multiple computer systems even used different proprietary protocols, requiring an extensive support system.

The integration of these systems onto the Internet Protocol (IP) has become the *de facto* standard under which business now operates. This IP-centric approach reduces cost, simplifies support, and reduces the overhead of multiple solutions.

### IP Is the Unifying Protocol

IP is the single protocol that integrates business applications and telecommunications services through unified communications to streamline business operations.

## Leveraging the Internet as a Business Resource

Just as IP has become the *de facto* protocol for all business networking, the Internet has become the vortex of business communications, both voice and data. In the past, we established point-to-point circuits to connect remote offices, exchange information with suppliers, and work with business partners. Today, the Internet provides nearly ubiquitous global connectivity.

All business is or has the potential to be global in nature. The Internet is the global communications tool we use to connect. Regardless of whether employees are co-located or dispersed, customers are nearby or across the globe, a business partner is in Toledo, Beijing, Sydney, or Sao Paulo, the Internet reaches them. A business must use the resources of the Internet for more than just competition. Today, the Internet is a survival tool. As one industry analyst has noted: *If a company isn't on the Internet, they don't exist.*

## Maximizing Resources for Enhanced Productivity

Unified communications tools integrate all the information resources of a company with the telecommunications system. Regardless of business size, the greatest efficiency comes from having access to the resources to resolve any call on first contact with the customer, business partner, supplier, or another employee. Full integration of the company resources delivers this power to increase productivity.

In the competitive business economy, the demand for service from customers is rising while budgets are diminishing. Every business is looking to do more with less. Increasing staff is expensive. Unified communications tools deliver the convergence of voice and data services in a way that enables doing more with less.

## Convergence as a Path to the Future

Business applications fall into five core areas or disciplines:

- Customer Relationship Management (CRM)
- Sales Force Automation (SFA)
- Supply Chain Management (SCM)
- Human Resource Management (HRM)
- Enterprise Resource Management (ERP)

As these business applications integrate with the voice and data networks and services, they represent the greatest potential for business streamlining and process improvement.

## Positioning Business Technology for the Future

A company that fully integrates the power of unified communications technologies is positioned to leverage the integration of the human factor with technology. Providing efficient access to the tools of business puts the tools to work today while setting the stage for the future.

The power of unified communications to enhance business processes is tremendous. The impact of emerging wireless broadband, mobility, video, social networking, and collaboration tools will change how businesses operate. Unified communications solutions provide the communications tools for the strong business of tomorrow.

## Summary

Businesses today have two options: They can hang on to the tools of the past few years and hope to survive or they can seize the tools of today that position them for competitive and technological advantage. The benefit of current unified communications solutions is that they deliver reduced cost and increased efficiency and productivity today while establishing a technology framework for tomorrow.