

Collaborative Conversations

The new paradigm of enterprise communications

Extend unified communications over time and channels to optimize the performance of your business-centered community

Introduction

Shifting market dynamics and a tough economy worldwide are radically altering the way companies do business. With companies chasing ever fewer consumer dollars, tremendous competition has ensued and business-as-usual no longer works well today. Given the uncertainty in consumer spending, most companies are now operating in a context of a “new normality” where organizational cost control efforts will be key.

Companies are carefully watching their bottom lines, and those already facing profitability pressures are seeking new strategies and tools that will help them do more with less. Along with a focus on “top line” growth there is a continued push for cost containment while also exploring new paths to productivity as a means for boosting profit margins. The challenge for most is determining how to react and plan thoughtfully and efficiently while reducing expenses and optimizing outcomes. However, this leads to the age-old problem of how to keep costs low without negatively impacting customer service, sales, and innovation.

Success in this complex business environment requires creativity and a firm commitment to optimal employee and operational efficiency across the enterprise. Most companies have already made investments in effective business processes and tools and have probably reached a point where they have maximized their cost effectiveness. For example, telephony and unified communications (UC) solutions – as well as CRM, ERP, and similar tools – are already quite sophisticated and will continue to grant cost savings (directly or indirectly), thus any latency that remains in these areas is quite likely only due to the human factor.

Companies also need to break down communication silos and optimize cross-functional efforts, and align investments in new technologies and service delivery with business objectives to help achieve the highest level of organizational efficiency. Management must ensure that employees understand the overall strategic directives of the company, and where and how they can contribute value in their respective roles. As a key concept in value-based management practices, this depends largely on a dynamic relationship between the business and employees at all levels, and an assurance that employees remain engaged, focused, and committed.

The challenge, therefore, lies in ensuring better connectivity between all individuals and fostering an environment that supports innovation through employee engagement across organizations, business units, and companies, and this is where a new generation of communications applications can help.

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The Importance of Employee Engagement

During these challenging times, a typical reaction is to cut spending on internal processes and head count; however, this is the last area where companies should be cutting corners. In this environment, human capital investment is not an option – it is an imperative – because companies that continue to invest in their employees will not only have a better chance of growing market share than their competitors, but they are also more likely to offer innovative solutions to customers, provide better customer service, and reduce operational costs by improving overall efficiency.

Human capital is therefore essential to enterprise performance and the bottom line. For example, when job satisfaction ratings are low and attrition rates are high, coupled with increased competition for highly skilled employees, the detrimental impact on the business becomes undeniable. Employees who are not fully engaged with the enterprise generally have low performance and output, which can ultimately affect the end-customer.

It is common knowledge – and common sense – that employees who are actively engaged in their jobs are highly productive workers. Companies that neglect to take the pulse of employee satisfaction risk having a substantial majority of employees who feel actively unengaged, and are therefore not as productive – or committed to the company's bottom line – as they could be. When employees are truly engaged, they become a vital resource that helps differentiate the company in the minds of the customers, which enables business growth and profitability.

While human resources strategies and an ethical business culture are key to improving and sustaining long-term employee engagement, the quality of collaborative working relationships with peers, superiors, and subordinates is just as important, if not more so. To that extent, IT managers can contribute to worker engagement as well by ensuring better connectivity and reducing latency in interpersonal communications. Employing efficient IT tools will reduce employee frustration and make their contribution to the overall enterprise performance more constructive and positive.

When employees are engaged, they are more likely to:

- Actively contribute to higher operating profits
- Over-perform compared to your competitors
- Better serve customers and partners in business situations
- Experience diminished frustration and increased loyalty to the company

Shifting Priorities for a Competitive Advantage

In the context of economic recovery, CEOs are shifting priorities to focus on new ways of distinguishing themselves from their competition through innovation. Creativity and innovation, along with exploring new paths of productivity, will become the new drivers for enterprises. To this end, reducing costs and growing the top line will contribute to revenue growth, while improving employees' engagement with customers and the company as a whole will become a critical key performance indicator. For this strategy to be successful, companies need to eliminate communication silos and improve cross-functional efforts. They further need to foster a corporate culture that drives innovation through employee engagement across departments, business units, and the integrated value chain by allowing discussions beyond the traditional organizational borders and mobilizing smarter competencies wherever they are. Easy and convenient collaboration in a team environment must be ensured, as being successful requires working at top efficiency.

Optimal employee performance clearly depends not only on behavioral factors such as confidence, trust, and loyalty, but also on how easy it is for workers to access the required level of knowledge and resources to perform well and deliver on their goals. Organizations must go beyond traditional communication connectivity tools and promote engagement through collaborative conversations in the most convenient manner, whatever the business situation or context.

Companies that can transform employee relationships and connections into enriched conversations spanning the whole enterprise via a variety of convenient communication applications (including voice, instant messaging, video, and collaboration) – while also positioning expertise in an enlarged business community of partners, customers, and providers via a variety of convenient communication applications – will empower employees, optimize the company’s performance, and gain a competitive edge. What’s more, collaborative conversations will help employees to better leverage the processes and the business model, and to access knowledge and interact with other colleagues and customers. In short, the knowledge is stored, shared, and easily accessible to all – making employees more engaged and empowered.

The Benefits of Collaborative Conversations

Problems arise in the enterprise when knowledge and accountability are diluted into silos across organizational units and employees only get partial information on a subject. For example, the pace of business execution is slowed by information retrieval delays and sluggish internal and external communication, which results in frustrated customers and employees.

The advantage of collaborative conversations is that they span an organization’s front and back office so that the whole company engages with a customer as one unit. Collaboration across boundaries can help give employees a 360-degree view on any topic, providing them with the knowledge and confidence to resolve customer issues, making them more engaged towards customers, and enabling them to provide a more consistent customer experience.

Alcatel-Lucent believes that successful organizations will surpass their competition by building a business-centered community where collaborative conversations that extend over time and channels become the new paradigm of enterprise communications.

Collaborative conversations are multi-party conversations that:

- Span the entire organization – and reach beyond the traditional boundaries of an enterprise to connect core competencies and tie together employees, partners, customers, and other relevant expertise from the “community”
- Enable seamless multi-channel communications allowing, for example, a conversation to start on IM, escalate to a Web conference (app sharing) session, and then add video and audio
- Occur on any device, across any network – public or private
- Provide a rich context such as extended presence information, historical data, and location base

Context awareness

Collaboration is more than just simple document sharing. True collaboration relies on contextual communications – threading the business context and valuable data across interactions/devices/networks to the integrated business value chain of employees, peers, partners, and the community at large – in order to leverage the power of conversations.

Context awareness will help dynamically connect the workforce, and allow employees to select the most relevant resources to participate in a conversation based on the particular business need. In essence, collaborative conversations combine unified communications and collaboration (UCC) with the richness of context-aware computing. Collaborative conversations boost employees’ trust and confidence in their ability to effectively solve business issues and, by extension, increase their engagement.

Companies that seek to employ context awareness to collaborative conversations need not make extensive additional investments. In fact, most already have applications in place and are not looking to rip-and-replace what is currently installed. Instead, they need to integrate their existing collaborative applications with UCC tools that ensure that real-time communications are enabled everywhere, and always-on. UCC and contextual awareness guarantee that no business interaction remains unresolved, and no opportunity unseized.

“Context-aware computing can help by improving workforce effectiveness by ensuring that associates have the information they need to support current tasks and actions. For example, providing social networking information enables customer service staff to identify associates with the required expertise, integrated with rich presence information that indicates their availability and the best medium by which to contact them.”

(Gartner Research, in “Context-Aware Computing: Four Questions CIOs Should Be Asking,” 21 August 2009, Anne Lapkin)

Communication-enabled business processes

Continuing to differentiate and innovate by enriching the way people access communications and interactions will increase speed of execution and boost productivity. Communication needs to be tightly integrated and streamlined with business processes to improve engagement and, ultimately, the performance of the employee and the company. Therefore, adding rich presence and historical data, as well as instant communications and escalation capacity over any media across the value chain, is key.

A communication-enabled business process (CEBP) is intended to optimize business processes by reducing the human latency that exists within a process flow. CEBP leverages unified communications (UC) capabilities/services – such as reminders, alerts, notifications, escalations, etc. – by embedding them into the business process flow to eliminate response latency. CEBP can be applied horizontally across various lines of business and different industries.

The result is a more efficient, more automated closed-loop which creates measurable business value. Many benefits arise by enabling collaborative conversations within a CEBP application. For example, deploying contextual presence in an existing business application is advantageous for individuals who rely extensively on this application to perform their primary job functions. The main barrier to adoption of new communication tools is the reality that, historically, tools are piled on top of tools or processes on top of processes – without linkages or integration – thus, in effect, creating more work for employees.

Presence indicates whether an enterprise user is available on the network and able to communicate with colleagues and, possibly, agents and customers. User presence capabilities give employees real-time access to subject matter experts, back/branch office workers, and field sales. Presence management has the potential to enable significant improvements in customer service delivery by allowing experts across the enterprise to intervene in the service process in real time.

Customer-centric organizations are increasingly extending customer service operations beyond the boundaries of the enterprise so that the conversation is always routed to the best available resource through the most effective channel.

By transforming knowledge workers across the enterprise into on-demand experts, organizations are able to more effectively meet the challenges of increasing productivity, improving the customer experience, and contributing to the enterprise’s bottom line.

Presence of enterprise knowledge workers with access to UC platforms provides a crucial asset – linking workers from diverse back office departments with the front office point of service operations – in order to facilitate effective routing of real-time communication and collaboration across sites and functions. Productivity and satisfaction increase as frontline employees gain expanded access to information and support – and overall enterprise effectiveness improves as formerly disjointed processes operate according to a well-coordinated flow.

“Contextual Presence in a Business Application: In this scenario, an individual can be contacted by name, skill, location, and/or presence based on the context of the problem/issue. For example, a person may be talking to a client and require the advice of a subject matter expert. Knowing the skill required, the person can determine the location, presence, availability, and/or name of the nearest expert and communicate with that person directly.”

(Gartner Research, in “UC Vision Scenarios: Communications-Enabled Business Processes,” 31 July 2009, Bern Elliot, Bob Hafner, Isabel Montero)

Conclusion

Companies are currently facing a complex financial environment worldwide. As you've discovered by reading this paper, to help recession-proof their business, and to compete and thrive in a volatile market, savvy companies are facing and meeting the constant challenge of finding the right balance between performance and cost containment – while also trying to ensure excellent customer service delivery and satisfaction.

In today's marketplace, executives and organizations should strive to get everything they can out of their human capital management. Taking the appropriate steps to ensure that employees are well-managed and equipped to do their jobs will reap huge business benefits for your company. The bottom line is that optimizing employee performance and engagement will help companies realize a competitive advantage as productivity is improved, customers' needs are proactively met, and, ultimately, revenues are increased.

An engaged employee leverages business context and communications with colleagues and customers to improve performance and align with the needs of the organization. Therefore, it is imperative to gain visibility and control over all aspects of employee engagement throughout your business and across all channels and locations, and to tie infrastructure and communications applications together to deliver a context-aware communication experience to all employees.

Continuous and contextual conversations foster the innovation and customer loyalty needed to drive business success. Effective collaborative communication strategies reduce costs and improve customer loyalty – offering the long-term benefit of increased revenues from loyal customers, as well as reduced customer churn. Collaborative communications integrate all interactions into a single knowledge flow – empowering employees with the right tools and information to collaborate in real time to achieve innovative solutions to customer problems, process bottlenecks, or new product development. Collaborative conversations also empower management to ensure business continuity, appropriately allocate resources, and align employee and corporate goals with business processes to increase employee satisfaction and boost revenue.

Key takeaways are that:

- Engaged employees will better contribute to enterprise performance, especially in times when human capital is becoming increasingly important to differentiate from competitors
- Being connected and able to collaborate on a large scale is made possible by UCC
- Contextual-aware communications improve the efficiency and effectiveness of UCC
- Collaborative conversations are a good example of CEBP facilitation

Differentiating by optimizing employee performance and ensuring collaborative communications across and beyond the enterprise requires vision and leadership, but the advantage of deploying these strategies is clear: those companies that rise to the challenge will be the winners in today's competitive marketplace.

By extending the capabilities already available today, companies can improve their performance as measured on current metrics, and also improve business processes to enhance overall organizational effectiveness. In so doing, they are better able to serve as a source of sustainable strategic advantage and competitive differentiation.