

Communication is the key to business success. However, despite the increase in communications technologies, there is still scope for users to make more use of the tools available. According to research conducted by the Manchester Business School for ntl:Telewest Business, organisations are ready for the next wave of technology to make work interaction far more manageable and productive.

In the last two decades, business communication technology has evolved from the round dial telephone to tone dial and mobile phones. Most people working in offices have been using email for a decade or more, and this in particular has proved to be a key business communications tool. The biggest benefit being that users can be anywhere in the world and documents are delivered within the hour that previously would have taken days by post and had to be sent separately to each recipient.

But with this plethora of wired and wireless tools that we use to move businesses forward comes the burden of management and the problems associated with what should be simple communications becoming ever-more complex. Analyst group IDC estimates that spending on email storage technology has reached \$180 million globally, which gives some indication of the problem that confronts 21st century communications. As PC usage grows and working from home becomes more and more widespread, converged communications has become the hot topic for discussion in the telecoms arena.

Working nomadically is a growing practice in the UK as people seek to balance family commitments and take advantage of communication technologies such as broadband at home. A study by Manchester Business School, sponsored by ntl:Telewest Business, found that 86 per cent of UK companies have a flexible or remote working policy for employees, and over two-thirds of British firms (67 per cent) allow staff to work from home, the key drivers for this being increased productivity and enhanced staff satisfaction.

The development of Ethernet standards, more advanced optics and network upgrades has extended the reach of a traditional LAN-to-LAN (Local Area Network) circuit from 25km to nationwide over the Wide Area Network (WAN). This is particularly useful for companies with disparate sites and remote workers and will greatly aid IP Multimedia.

Two become one

The increased demand for the convergence of telecommunications – transporting both voice and data as digital packets over Internet Protocol (IP) – has reduced the cost of running networks. The flexibility with which such a network can be managed, and the applications that can run across them are starting to deliver significant business benefits compared to email, voice calls and voicemail alone.

Communication service providers such as ntl:Telewest Business are looking at how they can enhance their product offerings to offer customers a leap forward in technology and iron out the inefficiencies that have emerged for teams and individual workers. This has enabled communications service providers to work on some 'blue sky' offerings, outlining the future of how we work nomadically.

Business messaging

Being able to work collaboratively from disparate locations offers productivity benefits for businesses. An example of the growth of collaboration tools currently on the market would be Microsoft's Instant Messenger (IM) tool, which, despite originating as a

consumer communications tool is now finding its way into companies. According to ntl:Telewest research, only a third of UK firms currently use instant messaging at work, but 61 per cent are looking at implementing new flexible working communications technologies this year, including IM.

The benefits of a business IM solution are numerous. Consumer IM tools such as Microsoft's Instant Messenger have presence options, where a worker can outline their availability, such as 'online', 'away' or 'on the phone'. This enables people hoping to interact to know whether that person is contactable or not, saving people waiting for email replies that never come because their contact has not set their 'out of office' option.

ntl:Telewest Business's research found that of those companies that used instant messaging, ease of use, speed of communication and time saving were seen as the key benefits.

Instant messaging has often been cited as a weak entry point for various internet-based threats, such as viruses, IM spam – or 'spim' - and spyware software, which infiltrates the corporate network and mails information on browsing habits and other work to third parties. For organisations to make the most of messaging technology, a secure, business-grade messaging system is required. This will allow businesses to benefit from the speed of response and ease of use associated with IM, but offer a managed, controllable secure environment.

New applications

Other tools can be added to the overall package to help nomadic working, including videoconferencing, person-to-person video, file transfer and collaborative working.

Despite its long existence as a communications tool for business, video conferencing is only deployed by 44 per cent of UK organisations, normally meeting room based, according to our research. However, of those using it, the vast majority (88 per cent) see it as beneficial for productivity.

Being able to video conference to disparate sites saves workers time - often billable hours - and travel expenses. Although it will never completely replace the personal touch of a face-to-face meeting, it is useful for keeping in touch after an initial personal contact, regardless of location.

What is needed is user friendly, PC based person-to-person video conferencing which will enable all employees to reap the numerous benefits of video.

Having converged email and voicemail boxes will also help nomadic workers pick up messages wherever they are, therefore making them more responsive and productive. Location is no longer an issue to productive, effective communications.

IP Multimedia

As part of its drive to help companies make the most of nomadic working and enjoy the productivity benefits of ubiquitous communications, ntl:Telewest Business supplies its IP Multimedia service. This is a managed service to offer businesses the productivity benefits outlined above.

The vision for IP Multimedia services is to help the modern organisation get the best from its staff and their time, wherever they choose to work. This doesn't necessarily mean enabling them to work longer, but it does mean enabling them to work smarter through more effective use of technology for all manner of ongoing communication.

IP Multimedia expands on IP telephony – Voice over IP (VoIP) – which carries voice in discrete packets of data over IP networks such as your LAN and inter office WAN, rather than over the legacy circuit-committed protocols of the public switched telephone network (PSTN). But, whereas VoIP only offers services for voice, IP Multimedia adds visual options, Instant Messaging, collaboration and Presence indicators to this audio technology.

IP Multimedia is secure, operating over ntl:Telewest Business's managed national IP network and is easily controllable. It also retains previous parts of the IM discussion so that 'conversations' can be continued and saved if necessary.

Nationwide capabilities

Being able to expand the reach of traffic carried from a LAN to a WAN, greatly benefits a service such as IP Multimedia. There are a number of ways to ensure connectivity of remote sites, one of which is using an IPVPN (virtual private network). This linking of sites over private dedicated lines, offers users the ability to prioritise traffic – voice, data and video. Typical bandwidths in the LAN – 10Mbps, 100Mbps and 1Gbps Ethernet – are now available over a wider area. This means that workers can access fast broadband and applications packages with IP Multimedia from wherever they choose to work, which will provide companies with significant competitive edge.

The Case for IP Multimedia

IP Multimedia enables authorised staff to make telephone calls via their PC, using video from inexpensive webcams, making for a far more personal form of contact. Also, busier executives will be able to filter callers according to urgency – for instance, important calls can be given priority, general work calls given a different routing and unknown numbers filtered below that. This way, they will be able to 'work smarter' by directing non-essential calls to their secretaries or other team members while focussing on more important business.

Using IP Multimedia drives down the cost of making site to site calls as it routes traffic over the IP Multimedia network, avoiding the regular call charges. With IP Multimedia, users can create network-based directories and cut down expensive calls to mobiles by calling IP Multimedia-to-IP Multimedia.

IP Multimedia also brings a more integrated delivery of mail. Staff with the allotted capability can connect remotely to the network to access email and voice messages.

IP Multimedia represents an evolution of ntl:Telewest Business' Centrex, a network based, managed, business voice solution that offers many advantages over a traditional PABX (Private Automatic Branch Exchange) solution. Being able to add services such as IP Multimedia underlines how future-proof ntl:Telewest's Centrex network is. As a scalable solution, you only need to rent as many IP Multimedia desktops as your company needs.

Customer Benefits

The age of IP telephony has barely begun, but UK business is set to benefit from the productivity and flexibility benefits it brings. IP Multimedia takes collaboration applications and brings them together into an environment of increased usability and manageability. As a managed service, the pain is taken away from the IT department, enabling it to focus on more important jobs whilst retaining overall control of the service.

Workers, especially those with families, will benefit from the flexibility of being able to work from home and other sites, improving their work-life balance and productivity. This should in turn produce a happier workforce and many cost savings to the employer.

Presence options will help people to work smarter – knowing when someone is likely to respond to a message rather than waiting in vain – and ubiquitous access to voice and email mailboxes will enable executives to be more responsive.

The IT manager will benefit from increased visibility, the CFO will see a return on investment within an affordable price structure and the CEO will see an increase in productivity, employee satisfaction and, ultimately, increased revenues.

UK companies want new flexible working communications technologies. We are at the dawn of a new era in unified business communications.