

Unified communications is difficult to define; providers should clearly frame their offerings

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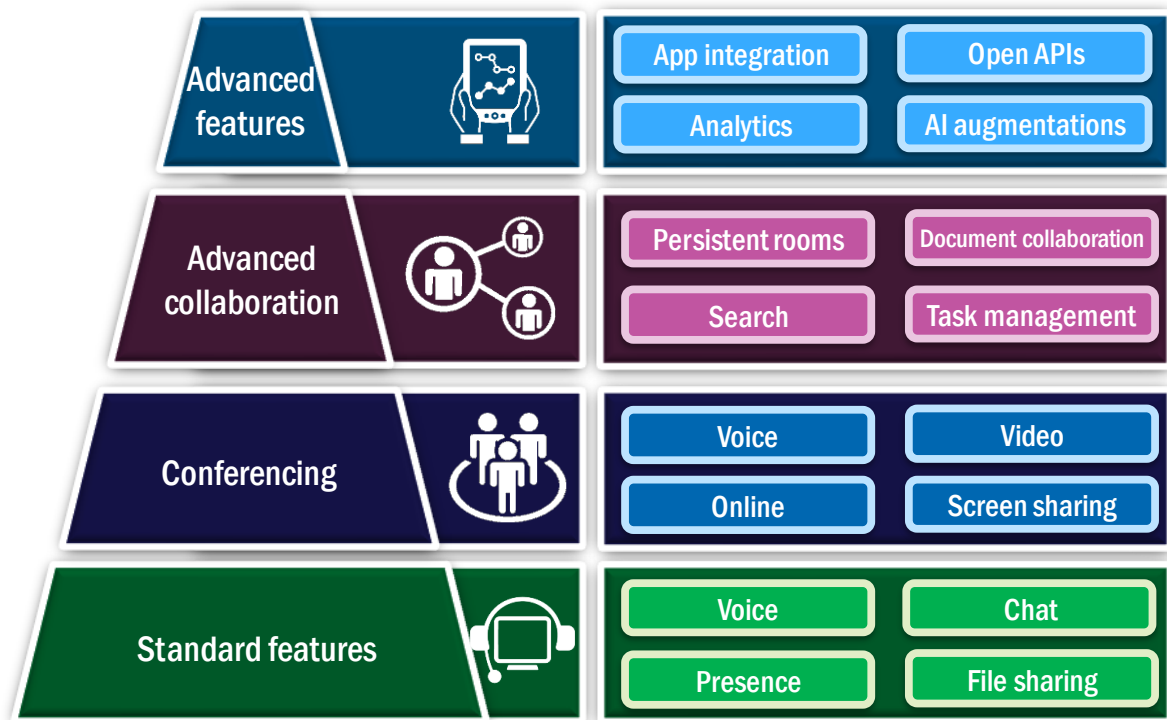
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The unified communications (UC) market is diverse, complex and competitive. Multiple players, including start-ups, telecoms operators, vendors and web-scale players, are competing for market share. The diverse landscape and varying approaches of the different providers have resulted in a complex ecosystem of infrastructure, features and applications that makes UC difficult to isolate or define. UC also has numerous components and is described in many forms (for example, UC, UC and C, UCaaS, CPaaS and hosted voice). The confusion around the features and forms of UC means that there is little consensus on what UC actually is.

The challenge for operators is to understand where they fit into the diverse landscape. This article provides a framework for thinking about UC, covering the various features and approaches. Regardless of approach, operators should develop a framework that provides their customers with solutions and benefits that are clearly understood; clarity will aid both customers and operators.

UC is the integration of any of a number of communication features

UC cannot be considered to be a single solution, but is rather the integration of a wide range of enterprise communications infrastructure and features. The quality of a UC solution is measured less in terms of the features provided, as these are easily replicable by another provider, and more in terms of how well these features are integrated.

Figure 1: Potential elements of a UC solution¹

Source: Analysys Mason, 2018

Most definitions of UC are incomplete and fail to capture part of the market. For example, from the perspective of an enterprise, a UC system can be independent of the phone system (some enterprises use consumer-grade Skype and consider it to be 'UC'). Operators have also been known to define UC as hosted PBX, even though on-premise infrastructure can also support UC features, and arguably the majority of UC systems are on-premise. We prefer to think of UC as a set of features, rather than being based on a set definition. A UC solution generally has four levels of features.

- Standard features.** A UC solution has a small set of core features; chat, presence, file sharing, hunt groups, calendar integration and video are the features most commonly required from a UC solution. UC solutions can be channelled through most endpoints (such as fixed and mobile handsets, laptops and tablets); 'true' convergence results in the consolidation of all an individual's endpoints within the same application or business number.
- Conferencing.** The next level of UC is to allow communication and collaboration between three or more people. This includes connecting meeting rooms, web links, devices, mobile phones and computers to a single platform that supports communication and collaboration features.
- Advanced collaboration.** Team-orientated solutions, in the form of persistent chat rooms, are emerging as the standard form of advanced collaboration solution. This allows for continuous communication and collaboration between two or more individuals. Features can extend to managing tasks and enabling team members to work simultaneously on documents.
- Advanced features.** Advanced integration can be a strong differentiator. Solutions can be integrated into third-party applications such as email, calendars, Office365 and SharePoint, and open APIs are also

¹ Contact centres and platforms could be considered as a separate UC layer. However, for simplicity, we have left these out in order to focus on the broader UC market.

provided to integrate UC features into business applications (such as ERP systems). AI features, such as bots or voice commands, are a key differentiator for some providers. For example, Amazon's Alexa for business brings voice activation to UC features, by enabling tools such as speech-to-text or voice-scheduling. Facebook has an expense bot that can automatically capture and log expenses into company systems through a chat window.

Each type of provider has its own approach to UC, but the trend is towards convergence

There are three main types of approach to UC solutions, leading to a fragmented market. Broadly speaking, providers either approach UC from a voice perspective or a collaboration perspective, though these are gradually converging.

- **The traditional approach** tackles UC from the bottom up, providing basic features and conferencing. This is generally an on-premise infrastructure approach to UC, and providers supply PBX and conferencing equipment that enables UC features. Most traditional UC providers have a legacy in this approach but are attempting to move up the value chain to target a greater portion of the market. Microsoft Teams and WebEx Teams show that traditional players are catching up to start-ups in terms of advanced UC features.
- **The hosted PBX approach**, adopted by providers such as RingCentral and 8x8, provides cloud-enabled UC features. These solutions tend to be basic hosted voice products, appealing to the simplicity preferred by SMEs. However, open APIs and advanced integration features are also provided if needed. These solutions are generally sold directly to enterprises and as white-labelled products to traditional players and telecoms operators who do not have their own cloud solutions.
- **The collaboration approach** focuses primarily on the most advanced collaboration features. Providers tend to approach the hierarchy from the top down, providing team-centric solutions or the most advanced features to differentiate from players that have a legacy and strong presence in voice. Providers like Facebook and Slack have taken this approach and target a more niche portion of the market, thereby avoiding competing on voice.

Operators should provide clarity on what their UC offer is and make this clear for both staff and customers

Telecoms operators need to be clear about what features their UC offer includes (and excludes) and focus on making a simple experience. Clarity on the offer will help customers and sales staff alike. It is important to note that the quality of a UC solution lies not in its features, but in the quality of its integration. Operators should approach UC from this perspective and aim to provide the best unified experience.