What is the Difference Between Unified Messaging and Unified Communications?
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1. Introduction

Offering the dictionary definition of a term is usually an easy way to start a speech or report. However, when the subject is unified messaging and unified communication, defining key terms is not a simple matter of flipping open the latest edition of Merriam-Webster. There's significant confusion about what unified messaging (UM) and unified communication (UC) are, and this confusion can lead organizations to make muddled or even misguided choices that compromise the effectiveness of their communications system.

Unified messaging (UM) allows enterprise employees to communicate quickly and effectively. The solution integrates various communication channels, such as email, voicemail and text, into a single interface, making it easy for coworkers to connect and maintain contact. Non-unified solutions deliver these messages in separate communication channels, meaning employees have to take time to check each system to retrieve voicemails, emails, etc.

Unified messaging services make employees’ workflows more efficient, resulting in significant benefits to the enterprise. Think about the time workers could save each day by having a system that allows them to quickly check all their messages from clients, coworkers and business executives. This time savings drives productivity and ultimately leads to business growth and profitability. When considering these advantages of the communication technology, it is easy to see why UM is a smart choice.

While UM is extremely beneficial to organizations, unified communications (UC) systems, which include even more collaboration tools, are an even smarter choice for businesses interested in increasing productivity. Unified messaging tools integrate with an overall UC solution – that is, messaging tools are an important part of UC. A major misconception, however, is that UM and UC solutions are one and the same. This is not true - UC involves tools that UM does not, including presence features that display when coworkers are available to chat or otherwise communicate with colleagues and clients. UC also includes telephony options, allowing all employees regardless of their location to communicate over a central IP telephone system. And data sharing features of UC enable coworkers to collaborate on important documents related to projects.

Enterprises have reported benefits from both UM and UC, but companies should be aware that adopting UM may just be a step in the right direction, and that there are even more benefits to be gained by implementing a full UC solution.

2. What are the main differences between UM and UC?

Before trying to determine why misconceptions about unified messaging and unified communications exist, we must first understand what the main differences are between the two types of services.
Unified Messaging

UM is the combination of non-real time services such as email, fax and voicemail. These kinds of messages can be left for an employee to retrieve at a convenient time. The unified aspect of this service means that an employee can retrieve all these messages at one time over one system. A single inbox stores all these messages, which can be accessed from various devices such as desk phones or mobile devices.

Unified Communication

UC is the combination of non-real time services (like those seen in UM) as well as real-time services such as instant messaging, telephony, web and video conferencing and presence. Many communication tools in UC go beyond those offered in UM, which is possibly the biggest differentiating factor between the two services. The main difference can be seen in the voice-based and instant communication channels included in UC. Video calling, for instance, makes it easier and faster for people to connect with one another.

Another tool that exemplifies how UC differentiates itself from UM is instant messaging. The word “instant” says it all - this UC feature allows employees to communicate with each other in real time, unlike UM systems in which messages left for recipients are sometimes irrelevant or not actionable by the time they are retrieved.

These tools are included in unified communication but not in unified messaging:

- **IP Telephony**: Phone communication that travels on the UC system over the internet.
- **Instant messaging**: Allows coworkers to instantly communicate through text messages, sharing information in real time.
- **Presence**: Notifies coworkers when a colleague is available. These presence tools go beyond the simple “green dot” and “Do Not Disturb” or “In Meeting” messages of some chat services.
- **Video conferencing**: Allows coworkers, customers and clients to communicate over the internet through video. This tool creates a more advanced connection than phone communication, and can help companies maintain contact with important partners faster and more often. It also cuts down on a company's costs, as representatives can meet virtually over a web conference, instead of going through the hassle and expense of traveling for in-person meetings.
- **Data sharing**: UC provides a central system on which coworkers store and share information and documents for projects, important clients, etc. This information can be accessed from various locations and devices by simply getting on the company’s network.

Overall, UC is far more advanced than UM and many businesses have chosen to adopt unified communication systems to maximize employee productivity and improve
customer services. UC is easily becoming a preferred choice for a communication solution in the enterprise world. According to research firm IDC, businesses will spend a total of $377 billion between now and 2016 on UC services.

Mobility has also affected which features are important to an effective UC solution. For example, the rise of smartphones and tablets has raised expectations regarding response time. Because these devices are always available, users expect responses to text messages and even email in near real-time. As a result, features such as instant messaging to allow on-the-go communication between coworkers have become attractive and coveted parts of unified communication systems.

By extending UC features to mobile devices, employees are able to respond to instant messages and email in a matter of seconds as opposed to hours or whenever they make it back into the office. More communication and higher productivity are direct results of incorporating instant messaging tools into a UC strategy.

3. Where did the misconceptions about UM and UC come from?

Both UC and UM include the integration of numerous features: Voicemail, email and other messaging come together with UM, and voice, telephony, video, text chat and data sharing all come together in UC. Unified messaging, however, has been used as a vague, catch-all term in recent years to describe the advanced communication technology available to businesses. Given the close relationship and between UC and UM, and the muddled way in which the media and even enterprise stakeholders sometime refer to these systems, the two have inevitably been confused with one another.

However, beyond this semantic blurring, the root of the problem may actually lie in the fact that too few actually understand all that a UC solution offers. This is not to discount the usefulness of UM, however. UM has been called a “subfield” of UC because unified communications does include messaging features, as described above. Messaging is an important part of UC, and UM features do interact and in some cases amplify the tools of unified communication.

For instance, a UC system might include a feature to have voicemails translated into text messages. A UC solution can take voicemails from a UM service and convert those voice messages into a text form, making it easier for employees to receive the
information on the go or even in the middle of a meeting, on their mobile device. Given the relationship between UM and UC, it’s natural they would experience roughly parallel growth in terms of adoption rates, and a report from COMMfusion confirmed this is the case. Since 2005, companies have been looking to replace their outdated communication systems, specifically aging voicemail services, and this drove the growth of UM from a $772.3 million industry to a $1.28 billion industry in the span of five years.

COMMfusion’s report provides valuable insight into the markets for UM and UC, but it also reflects the shifting definitions of the two types of solution. For example, COMMfusion refers to a hybrid “UM/UC” solution, which may lead to the belief they two services are the same.

4. Case Studies

City of Oakland

The California city has more than 5,000 employees working at 114 facilities, creating a need for a solution that keeps all these dispersed workers connected. Before deciding to upgrade its communication, the city was operating with an outdated PBX system from 1989 that caused numerous failures.

In 2005, the city decided to switch to a unified communication service that enabled city employees to communicate with one another quickly and effectively, regardless of their location or what facility they work from. The real-time features of the UC system have made communication more flexible, offering employees multiple options to reach each other. Telephony and instant messaging tools, as well as collaboration features through data sharing, were crucial features for the city. This created efficient workflows not possible with its previous phone system.

“Everything I’ve heard is positive about it,” said Robert Glaze, the CTO for the City of Oakland. “People just love it.”

Idyllwild Arts Academy

The school has more than 70 buildings on campuses across Los Angeles and San Diego in relatively remote areas, making reliable communication a must. The long list of features available through the UC system the school adopted, as well as its scalability, made communications flexible and adaptable, meeting the school’s needs.

The school reported the UC features enhanced productivity and helped to streamline all communication functions, not just messaging, so that students could stay connected to parents and teachers, and staff could collaborate with one another over multiple tools. The real-time tools of the system were seen as a major benefit.

“Everyone has found the [UC] system easy to use because it adapts to the way we work, not the other way round,” said Idyllwild IT Director Buck Little.
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The design and engineering firm needed communication tools that would enable employees in the office to reach those working in the field, and the tools had to ensure these communications could be accomplished in real time to respond to clients’ changing needs.

The company chose a UC system because it included collaboration tools like video and web conferencing not available just with UM. Employees began using the UC tools of presence and instant messaging, and, as a result, employees are saving time and increasing productivity.

“A wide range of demographics work here,” said RMH Group IT Manager Troy Kuskie. “We have young engineers just out of school who use their cellphones almost exclusively and then seasoned veterans who still use desk phones. The selected communications solutions had to fit with our environment.”

RMH Group

5. Conclusion

It’s easy to see the difference between unified messaging and unified communication: One offers real-time collaboration solutions, while the other does not. Both services are helpful to many companies, and with the growing attention surrounding unified services in recent years, it is also to see how confusion between UM and UC originated. However, it is important for companies to remember they are separate services and do not both offer equal functionality.

For companies looking to truly enhance their communication services and collaboration efforts, they should look to a simplified UC solution that is rich with features, including UM tools. A UC service that is easy for both IT and employees to use will result in productivity and collaboration gains - benefits that can be seen with a UM service alone but will be much more significant with the addition of real-time communication tools. •
About ShoreTel

ShoreTel is a provider of business communication solutions whose brilliantly simply unified communications platforms, applications and mobile UC solutions promise a new rhythm of workforce engagement and collaboration. With costly complexity eliminated by design from its award winning, all-in-one IP phone system, UC and contact center solution, and its industry leading hosted business phone system, workers enjoy a freedom and self-reliance that other providers can’t match. Users have full control to engage and collaborate, no matter the time, place or device, for the lowest cost and demand on IT resources in the industry. ShoreTel is headquartered in Sunnyvale, California, and has regional offices and partners worldwide. For more information, visit shoretel.com or shoretelsky.com