



PRESS RELEASE

Opinion Piece

October, 2011

Page 1 of 2

Business communication goes social

Growing Gen Y work force demands socially-integrated unified communications

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The rise of social media in business

Social media has already become widely used in business, but its impact will be felt even more pervasively in future, as unified communications and other applications find a natural home in a social setting.

Marketing, networking and information

Currently, the main business applications of social media are marketing, networking and information gathering.

A year ago, LinkedIn was thought of as the best business networking tool, while Facebook provided interaction with close personal friends. Twitter was still finding its feet in the enterprise.

Today, LinkedIn remains strong while Facebook has made major inroads as a more valued networking tool and a personal, campaign or corporate branding platform. Meanwhile, Twitter has become indispensable as an interest-based newsfeed, whether you're following thought leaders such as FNB's chief economist @ceesbruggemans, publications like @BusinessDayDigi, or assembling groups of like-minded Twitterers, for example <http://twitter.com/#!/erichhugo/rugby>.

Having created a public group such as the one above, you can then create a custom online newspaper of its "members'" insights and news sources on a site called paper.li, for example <http://paper.li/erichhugo/1312897894>. Each issue can be republished on social media to position you as a curator of thought leadership, thus building your brand. The networking and knowledge-based applications of Twitter are legion, and the Twittersphere requires constant monitoring for new benefits and apps.

Social and unified communications

"Use of social networks by the Fortune 500 companies has seen explosive growth in 2010, with 83% of the companies using at least one of the social media sites." – www.socialtimes.com

Impressive as the evolution of social media in business already is, the integration is about to get even tougher, as business communications takes on a social aspect.

With Generation Y-ers entering the work force, the demand for a more integrated, collaborative and social communication environment is on the rise to suit this generation's preoccupation with mobility and UC-like apps such as Skype and WhatsApp.

To this, UC vendors are responding by adapting their wares to offer even more collaborative ways of communicating. Already, industry thought leaders are predicting the death of email in favour of social messaging, and sacrilegious as that sounds, it's probably just a matter of time.

In addition, some enterprise tools are developing social elements or offshoots – most famously Chatter – a free private social network developed by Salesforce.com.



PRESS RELEASE

Opinion Piece

October, 2011

Page 2 of 2

In short, mini social networks are inevitable in business communication, whether created as part of your enterprise installation, intranet, communications interface, productivity suite or social network of choice.

Benefits of social-UC integration

The benefits of social-UC integration will be enormous.

Some are broadly congruent with the vision of Communications-Enabled Business Processes (CEBP), and in such cases the social-UC integration will most likely be front-ended by productivity, communications or enterprise applications.

From these apps, it will be easy to organise enterprise groups in a social, collaborative space, and allow one-click conference calls, easy desktop sharing and so forth in order to conduct online meetings.

Other benefits centre on the success of social media on the mobile platforms of the day (currently, the iPad and smartphones). Vendors seeking these benefits will pursue further business cases for the integration of presence and location awareness into mobile-accessible social media. This process has already kicked off with Foursquare.

Clearly, mobile will dominate as the access platform of choice.

Challenges

While the possible futures alluded to above will probably begin within company firewalls, social-UC integration will soon broaden to associate companies.

The main challenge with this, exacerbated by employees' introduction of their own devices into the corporate systems mix, is security. Managing the new ecosystem of extra-corporate collaboration and communication will require clear rights-based access policies and strong protection. Most immediately, externally-hosted platforms may be shunned in favour of private cloud or own-data centre delivery models.

It's how you use it

The advent of social-UC integration offers an exciting world of new opportunities. As always, it's what you do with it and how you manage it that will make the difference.

** Tellumat is the South African distributor of ShoreTel systems.*