

Increase Your Competitive Advantage with Business Communications Technology

Efficient business communication is vital to managing growth and increasing success. Today, successful companies around the world achieve that efficiency with network-based communications tools such as e-mail and a Web presence. These tools support the high levels of productivity and customer support that growing companies need to compete in larger and more lucrative markets. A sound network foundation will also support the new technologies and applications necessary to sustain ongoing competitiveness.

Summary

Many growing companies reach a time when their business processes can no longer efficiently manage day-to-day activities. When this happens, minor concerns such as occasional missed phone calls or mistakes in handwritten customer orders can quickly escalate into significant problems. These problems can reduce customer satisfaction and make it harder to compete effectively. At this pivotal moment in a company's evolution, success depends on updating business processes quickly, in a way that supports future growth.

Even companies with very few employees can dramatically improve business processes using network-based business communications. A basic network infrastructure can:

- **Improve productivity** by letting employees easily share information while they are in the office, working remotely, or traveling.
- **Increase customer satisfaction** by providing a communications foundation that allows your company to attend to customers quickly and easily.
- **Support sales** by giving prospective customers fast, easy access to product data and corporate information.

To generate the greatest return from the network investment, this basic network should align with business priorities such as increasing responsiveness to customers or generating greater visibility with target audiences. Once the network is in place, it becomes easy to optimize updated business processes by adding technologies such as wireless connectivity and unified voice and data communications.

Business Challenges

Most traditional business communications rely on telephone and paper-based processes. These resources do not readily support the level of productive interaction that growing businesses need to excel, and can be easily overwhelmed in periods of rapid growth. "Organizations are looking to increase productivity by focusing on the interactions between colleagues, partners, and customers, says John Chambers, Cisco® Chairman and CEO. "Productive interactions also help improve profitability and customer satisfaction, and they create new opportunities for corporate growth and success."

Sharing Information

To work efficiently, employees need to share information and communicate with the business systems that hold the company's vital data. This collaboration and communication must be fast and efficient, whether employees are at the corporate office, traveling, or working from a remote locations. Without efficient business communications, employees cannot easily share information and provide the best possible service to customers.

Accommodating Increased Calls

In addition, when a company cannot accommodate an increased volume of incoming calls, everyone from prospects to long-term customers may not receive the level of service they expect. With myriad choices in what and how they buy, customers are no longer bound by traditional purchasing habits or brand loyalties. They are accustomed to shopping and interacting with businesses online, and they expect easy access to information, real-time responses, and fast, personalized service. Faced with a choice of leaving a message or calling a competitor, most customers will choose to work with the more responsive and accessible business.

Eliminating Paper-Based Communications

The hand-written messages associated with traditional phone systems can also limit productivity. They may be incomplete, incorrect, or simply misunderstood. In fact, errors in many types of hand-written documents tend to increase as workloads grow. These errors are often expensive, leading to mistakes in order processing and delays in shipping.

Paper documents of all types also tend to get misplaced and misinterpreted, making it difficult for employees to work productively and respond quickly to customer needs. Employees might resort to using out-of-date information that leads to poor or uninformed business decisions.

Securing Corporate Data

Securing paper-based corporate data is also an important and complex challenge. Security breaches can mean not only lost data, but lost productivity and potentially the loss of customer confidence. A business must protect itself against these breaches to secure its data and its reputation, and to comply with new government regulations. Many areas of government are accelerating requirements to document and secure business information and technology assets. With paper-based processes, many businesses are unaware if they are compliant or not.

To increase the communications efficiency that is necessary to improve operational efficiency and customer satisfaction, companies need to:

- Improve information sharing among employees.
- Provide employees working in the office or remotely with secure access to corporate-wide data.
- Provide customers with consistent, responsive, and dependable service.
- Assure compliance with regulatory requirements.
- Provide all critical audiences with ready access to product and corporate information.
- Protect stored data from internal and external threats.

Solution

Growing companies can manage success and position themselves to compete in aggressive markets by investing in a network that focuses on business communications efficiency. Deploying Internet business solutions provides a measurable and extensive return on investment (ROI),

according to the Net Impact Study, a project sponsored by Cisco and conducted by Hal Varian of the University of California-Berkeley, Robert E. Litan of The Brookings Institution and Momentum Research Group.

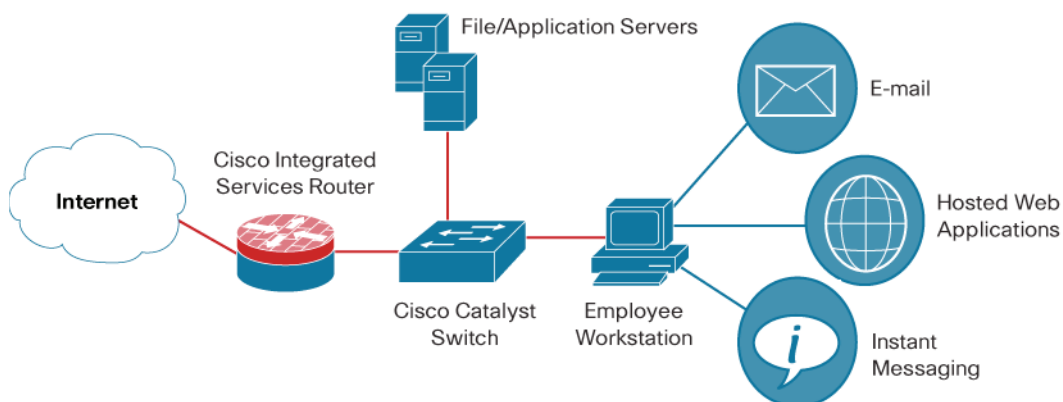
The study defines Internet business solutions as any initiative that combines the Internet with networking, software, and computing hardware to improve existing business processes or create new business opportunities. Preliminary results showed that organizations in the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Germany currently deploying these solutions have realized a cumulative cost savings of US\$163.5 billion.

U.S. organizations alone have realized a cumulative cost savings of \$155.2 billion. These organizations expect to collectively realize more than \$500 billion in cost savings by 2010. Adoption of Internet business solutions in the United Kingdom, France, and Germany has resulted in a current, cumulative cost savings of €9 billion (US\$8.3 billion). These organizations estimate these solutions have also helped enhance revenues by €86.4 billion (US\$79 billion) to date.

A foundation network that can support Internet business solutions should consist of:

- A **network infrastructure** to move data between people and between applications
- **Servers** to support business and Web applications
- **Personal computing devices** to give employees access to the network
- **Communications applications** to facilitate contact and collaboration
- **Web applications** to create an online presence
- **Security systems** to protect the network

Figure 1. The Network Foundation



Network Infrastructure—A network infrastructure consists of switches and routers that move data between people and between devices such as personal computers and storage media. Switches link these devices to create a local area network (LAN), and deliver messages between the devices. Routers form the core of the network by connecting multiple LANs to create a corporate network infrastructure (Figure 1). Routers can also be used at the edge of a network to connect the network to remote offices or an Internet service provider (ISP). Some routers also contain additional functionality such as network security capabilities.

Servers—File, application, and storage servers are computers that are shared by multiple users. A personal computer (PC) can act as a server as well as function as a workstation for a single user. File servers store programs and data that are accessible by any user on the network. Application

servers operate the programs and process data. Storage services provide easy access to documents and corporate data from any network location.

Personal computing devices—Employees use personal computing devices to interact with business applications such as e-mail and to access corporate data. Devices such as desktop and laptop PCs can be connected to the network through a wired or wireless connection. Wireless connectivity requires a device known as an access point that is connected to a network switch.

Communications applications—Communications applications help employees collaborate and communicate efficiently with other employees, customers, partners, and suppliers. E-mail reduces much of the need for phone calls and hand-written notes. This saves time by letting employees communicate at their convenience - without the annoyance and wasted time of missed calls and inaccurate messages - and reduces costs by eliminating the need for many additional phone lines. E-mail also provides a richer and more productive communication experience with document attachments that can contain pictures and video, and direct Web links to additional information.

In the “Plain speaking: voice communications at the office” survey sponsored by Cisco and conducted by The Economist Intelligence Unit, 81 percent of respondents say they are more or very productive when communicating with people as a result of automated communications methods. In addition, 73 percent say electronic communications methods such as e-mail, telephone, and instant messaging (IM), have somewhat or greatly improved their level of workplace satisfaction.

Scheduling systems also promote productivity, allowing employees to easily schedule and change meetings, invite additional participants, and distribute agendas and other relevant information.

Web applications—Web applications create an online presence that makes it much easier to establish widespread awareness of the company and its products. Companies can use the Web site to provide multiple audiences with fast access to current product, pricing, and contact information. A Web site can also support financial applications such as order processing for online purchasing. Other online services such as customer support scheduling can help employees provide customers with consistent, responsive, and dependable service.

Security systems—Security devices such as firewalls and intrusion detection systems (IDS) protect corporate data from unauthorized access that can result in theft and tampering. Protecting vital corporate data is crucial to business continuity and continuing customer satisfaction.

Foundation Solutions in Action

Growing businesses in many industries have benefited from a strong network foundation. Watt Commercial Properties, a commercial real estate firm headquartered in Santa Monica, California, is an example of a small firm that improved its productivity by creating a foundation network.

Real estate firm improves productivity—Watt Commercial Properties was quickly outgrowing its data networking capabilities. Only a few of the company’s PCs were connected to the network and able to access financial applications. None of the 15 remote offices was connected to the central office through the network, and only a few employees had e-mail accounts. Paper copies of critical documents were shipped between locations, requiring agents to spend a great deal of time searching for current files and coordinating with headquarters. Each remote office managed its own computers, and the company’s IT infrastructure grew into an assortment of desktops, laptops, printers, and telephones with different configurations at each office. When agents encountered technical problems, their

focus was diverted to fixing them rather than proactively managing their business. The firm desperately needed a flexible, secure network that required minimal management.

The solution was a foundation technology network that linked the firm's headquarters and branch locations. All employees have immediate access to current information, including images of leases that are stored on the network. Employees are more productive, and opening new offices is easier because the firm has defined a replicable network structure that can be deployed quickly and easily.

Once the network technology foundation is in place, businesses can further improve communications efficiency by adding advanced technology such as wireless communication and unified communication. Wireless communication lets employees access the network with a device that uses radio frequency technology instead of a wired connection, so they can work productively while mobile. Unified communications combines telephony with network-based data communication, so employees can store and forward phone messages as easily as e-mail messages. Phone messages can also be linked with e-mail messages, pictures, video, and Web links.

Advanced technologies such as these can be added to a network foundation based on business priorities. For example, a business might want to improve the productivity of its mobile employees. Wireless network connectivity allows employees to use wireless computers to access the network from any location on the corporate campus. With a strong technology foundation, this capability can be easily added by implementing wireless LAN controllers, access points, wireless-enabled laptops, and wireless security products.

To improve customer service, a business might add a customer call center solution that is based on unified communications. This solution can automatically provide customer history and other relevant information to operators, creating a more efficient communications experience for the customer. Unified communications also eliminates long-distance charges and dramatically reduces the cost of adding and moving phone lines. Businesses can add unified communications to a foundation network with a voice-ready router, unified communications software, and IP telephones.

Advanced technologies further streamline business operations so employees can efficiently share information across the company and with customers and suppliers. The network created by food distributor JJ Food Service Limited of Middlesex, United Kingdom illustrates advanced technology in action.

Food distributor increases sales— JJ Food Service Limited employed 70 agents to handle inbound and outbound calls to serve 20,000 customers, with peak hourly sales approaching \$250,000. If a phone line was unavailable even for a short time, customers would call a competitor. When the distributor built a new operations center, call center reliability was critical because down time directly reduced profits.

The solution was a unified communications-based call center with redundant components in different buildings that provided the needed reliability. The solution even automatically routed calls to an agent who spoke the customer's language. Advanced services improved customer service still further by moving high-value customers to the head of the call queue. In addition, employees can now work more flexible hours because the solution lets them work from home by using an Internet connection for voice calls.

Conclusion

Cost-effective network foundation technology is making it easier than ever to implement a robust network infrastructure. With this infrastructure, organizations of all sizes and across industries can take advantage of network-based communication tools to increase operational efficiency and become more competitive.

By aligning technology planning with current and future business goals and challenges, the foundation network can support immediate requirements and be cost-effectively expanded as needed. With this technology, growing companies can sustain and increase success as they meet new challenges.

For Additional Information

For more information about network infrastructure technology, visit:

http://www.cisco.com/en/US/netsol/ns339/networking_solutions_small_medium_sized_business_home.html



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