

## The Choice of a Premise-Based UC Solutions



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## OCS DELIVERS MEASURABLE BENEFITS TO A TECHNOLOGY FIRM

Not surprisingly, unified communications solutions have gained significant traction among technology firms. Many communication technology vendors become early adopters of advanced technologies as they often have a stake in the new market and provide a certain component or service that is dependent upon the success of the new technology. It is also beneficial to gain greater in-house skills and expertise to deploy and test the solution prior to deploying at customer sites.



In 2007, NET acquired Quintum technologies to provide a full range of complementary gateway portfolios. These gateways bridge the gap between legacy TDM-based communications with the latest UC IP-enabled technologies, providing integrated UC across the enterprise. NET has developed partnerships with UC vendors such as Microsoft in order to ensure interoperability of the UC platforms with multiple different PBXs and other communications solutions on the customers' premises.

Leveraging its superior understanding of UC benefits, its expertise in UC implementations, and its relationship with Microsoft, NET was among the first companies to also deploy UC for its own business. Its specific communications infrastructure circumstances also favored this move since NET was using an outdated PBX.

NET started looking at various communication solutions in 2005 as it needed to replace its ROLM 9751 PBX. It planned a “forklift” replacement of its aging infrastructure at two major sites. NET evaluated both IP-enabled and pure-IP PBXs from Nortel, Siemens and other vendors. One of the disadvantages of these solutions was their inability to provide true unified messaging (UM) integrating voicemail with Microsoft Outlook. Further, most of these platforms carried a very high price tag of about \$300,000.

Finally, NET was looking at deploying an enterprise-grade instant messaging (IM) platform. At the time, most of its employees were using Yahoo, AOL or MSN IM clients. Depending on who they were communicating with, they needed to switch clients. Also, presence was somewhat sketchy.

NET's IT staff started evaluating Microsoft's Live Communication Server (LCS). When they looked at Microsoft's roadmap for LCS and its potential successors, NET's IT Director and staff recognized the fact that these platforms were built specifically for businesses and will evolve along with business needs and requirements. Further, as a Microsoft partner, NET felt it had an opportunity to trial and test these new solutions, provide useful feedback to Microsoft and thus also set an example to customers and showcase the platform's capabilities as well as its own expertise.

LCS provided NET employees with a number of advanced capabilities. It offered a uniform IM interface and presence across sites and users. It also allowed all employees to make outgoing VoIP calls, specifically targeting remote employees, which helped reduce long-distance calling costs.

In 2007, NET migrated its LCS users to Microsoft's Open Communications Server (OCS) 2007, and in early 2009 upgraded its infrastructure to OCS R2.

Currently, NET has about 260 licenses installed. OCS R2 has been rolled out to all NET employees world-wide as the primary communication tool for Voice, IM and audio/web conferencing, replacing external conferencing service and the legacy PBX systems. The majority of the employees are using inexpensive Plantronics headsets and some have USB phones. NET's IT Manager, Micky Landrum, says that while headsets were not originally a preferred "accessory" for most business users, they have become the preferred hardware over legacy handsets.

NET's IT Director, Carmel Wynkoop, identifies numerous benefits that the company has realized from the deployment of OCS:

- It has upgraded to an IP-based telephony platform that offers less expensive on-net and off-net calling. This feature has been particularly valuable in integrating remote workers which comprise about 30% of all NET employees. Further, the company has international offices in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan and IP telephony has enabled less expensive communications around the globe.
- Single-platform unified messaging increases the efficiency and productivity of NET's IM users.
- The cost of mobile communications (due to travelling employees) has been drastically reduced by integrating mobile devices with the corporate IP telephony platform. NET has connected over 15 mobile devices to OCS providing IM, simultaneous ring and other features on those devices. While calling out through the PBX is not a major selling point in the U.S. (due to competitive mobile communication pricing), significant savings can be realized on international calls.
- With about 15% to 20% of its employees traveling on a regular basis, NET considers the use of laptop softphones one of the main benefits of UC providing a significant source of cost savings for traveling employees.
- The cost of endpoints has been reduced through the use of softphones and inexpensive headsets instead of desktop phones.

- OCS's conferencing and desktop sharing capabilities have helped reduce travel costs and optimize collaboration among employees and between NET users and external parties. NET is in the process of re-engineering its sales process to leverage Communicator for sales calls and demos, thus reducing travel for sales engineers and, at the same time, enabling more productive interactions with prospective customers. The savings stem from multiple sources including direct travel costs, travel time (away from other productive activities), etc.
- Prior to deploying OCS R2, NET estimated annual savings of about \$110,000 from eliminated PBX maintenance and reduced Web/audio conferencing costs. It expects to generate further savings with R2 due to its superior conferencing capabilities.
- OCS R2 provides a number of other capabilities that NET finds quite beneficial – contact center, auto attendant, etc.

Overall, NET's migration to unified communications, going through multiple stages from a legacy PBX to LCS, to OCS 2007 and, eventually, to OCS R2, was very successful with the new solution delivering both cost savings and productivity benefits. There were some implementation challenges due to early adoption and lack of technical documentation. NET's experience with the UC implementation is indicative of the need for businesses deploying UC to seek professional services expertise from their vendors and channel partners. While certain integration challenges are likely to persist going forward due to the very nature of UC involving the integration of multiple disparate applications, the professional skills and expertise pool is likely to grow bigger. Education and training will need to be provided by vendors and sought by customers.

Another challenge was presented by the fact that the current PBX solution had no SIP trunking services to enable an end-to-end SIP environment. NET uses its own gateways to connect to the PSTN via regular PRIs. VoIP gateways play a major role in UC implementations and NET's gateway provides additional functionality including breaking down lines into analog and SIP, AD integration, fax support and the ability to have a phased implementation approach, rather than a “rip and replace” approach.

NET has plans to further leverage OCS R2 for more advanced applications and capabilities. Leveraging UC to enable a more dynamic integration with other Microsoft applications such as Dynamics CRM and AX would allow the system to initiate communication with knowledge workers and provide a conduit for change in real time.

## CONCLUSIONS

Should a business choose to retain control over its applications, it can outsource only the solution implementation from a vendor or a VAR/reseller. A customer-premise implementation can help businesses leverage existing infrastructure and also eventually add other applications (e.g. expertise sharing) either through internal development or from a third party.

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