Business Benefits of Unified Communications: A Story of Many Decisions

By EVAN WADE - Contributor

Do more with less. Newly hired and ready to enact major change, a high-level decision-maker in a regional healthcare system soon learns how much weight those four words can carry when her leaders make a "simple" demand: Use the business benefits of unified communications to slash financial inefficiencies without impacting patient satisfaction or quality of care.

By making the right decisions, leaders can feel the business benefits of unified communications.

Undaunted, our hero begins hunting down what The New York Times called the "one percent solutions" designed to chip away at inefficiencies through small changes, but keeps her eye out for large-scale changes to implement as well. Technology quickly becomes a pivot point on both sides. Between the problems it solves and the inefficiencies older systems introduce, there are simply too many points to ignore.

Join our hero as she implements changes that meet her superiors' "do more with less" mantra — and highlight the business benefits of unified communications.

Decision 1: More On-Premises Communications Solutions

For her first major move, the admin initially decides to replace her system's aging communications solutions with something more modern (and far more functional). She speaks with multiple vendors and even invests in a cost-benefit analysis. This analysis informs her that while these individual modern tools would undoubtedly bring an increase in functionality, they wouldn't necessarily come with added efficiency.

The biggest issue she uncovers: Tools that reduce complexity on the front end don't always have the same effect on the IT team on the back. In fact, introducing so many new tools for IT to manage at once could have disastrous effects: What happens when her overwhelmed technical staff can't quickly respond to an outage? When the server housing her telehealth video conferencing software goes kaput, who has the technical wherewithal to make a speedy fix?

Unable to get a satisfactory answer, the admin moves on to her next point of research, discovering business benefits of unified communications in the process.

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Decision 2: A Move to the Managed Cloud

Intrigued by its revenue-boosting, cost-cutting potential, the board has long waffled on adding telehealth to its suite of services. Here's where our hero turns to cloud technology.

In a trial run, her team discovers a telehealth service, run over a cloud-based unified communications-as-a-service (UCaaS) platform, that allows clinicians to stay connected with patients without placing undue technical or financial burden on the system. Where an on-premises solution might allow IT greater control, the vendor handles the brunt of the technological heavy lifting in a managed platform.

This also means the system's IT staff have direct access to help in the event of technical snags — a huge relief compared to tackling issues solo.

The move to cloud telehealth allows the system to offer patients far more without placing disproportionate strain on IT. In many cases, enabling telehealth at a location means little more than adding a computer with a webcam. Later, when two hospitals under her watch report a drastic drop in 30-day readmissions, clinicians cite the ability to provide follow-up care without forcing the patient to return as a major factor. The system is able to grab added revenue with one hand and reduce a major cost in 30-day reads with the other. That's a good first outcome by any measure!

> *The added mobility made possible by a UCaaS solution could allow the healthcare system to open more context-sensitive care options, such as temporary sports clinics or flu shot outreach locations.*

Decisions 3 and 4: Automated Reminders

Emboldened by her recent success, the admin decides to try her hand at another major revenue-eater: missed appointments, an issue that may cost the industry as much as $150 billion per year, according to SCI Solutions.

Unfortunately, early trials do not yield satisfactory results. Asking facilities to assign staff to appointment reminder texts and calls, while marginally useful, carries steep productivity and hourly wage costs. Facility managers grumble at this added cost: When so much of their financial success is gauged by efficient use of scheduled hours, putting a nurse or similarly qualified staff in front of a phone for large chunks of each shift may be the difference between an end-of-year bonus and a "better luck next time."

In this instance, adding automation makes the plan viable. Remembering that her unified communications provider has an application programming interface (API) for appointment reminders, she sets her technical personnel — with the aid of the vendor — to work. Some time later, they produce a solution as elegant as it is useful. Patients respond to the reminder SMS with a *YES* or *NO*, setting off an automated chain of events that might lead to a reschedule or a follow-up call, among other outcomes. It's another coup in a system still feeling the afterglow of a smart telemedicine solution — and another sign that our administrator is adept at managing healthcare's eternal need to do more with less.

Conclusion: More Decisions, More Benefits

Most encouraging, the benefits listed here are simply the most tangible ones. Because her healthcare system relies less on local hardware and more on cloud infrastructure, her IT team is able to do more with less: In this instance, less on-prem means more savings on hardware and related expenses.

From there, the admin's decisions could go any number of ways. The added mobility made possible by a UCaaS solution could allow the healthcare system to open more context-sensitive care options, such as temporary sports clinics or flu shot outreach locations. Because her UCaaS solution makes numerous solutions available on a pay-as-you-use basis, our hero is able to investigate, implement, and

experiment as she sees fit — a role her superiors are increasingly comfortable placing her in, given the streak of great choices she's made thus far.