Integrating Conferencing with Business Processes
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If you're not tired of communications buzz-words yet, here's another one to add to your collection: Communications-enabled business processes, or CEBP. The idea behind CEBP is that business processes are better when communications are integrated at key points along the way, making it easier for the right people to get the right information at the right time—thereby saving time and money, making better and faster decisions, and streamlining sales, service, and product cycles.

This type of back-end business process integration is the next wave of unified communications, and it's one of the really important ways in which UC will change how companies, and people, do business. But companies don't have to start with full-fledged UC to reap the benefits of CEBP. For instance, integrating conferencing capabilities into existing business applications can ensure decisions get made faster, in a more collaborative and congenial environment. This leads to better customer support, sales success and product development.

The low-hanging fruit in this area are those processes which can show a clear ROI around shortening or improving cycle time, such as sales, customer support, and research & development. Others good candidates include business processes that already embed communications (typically an e-mail or pager alert) and which could be made even timelier and more effective by delivering communications specific to the recipient's needs (say, a conference call or webinar when group decisions must be made); and finding the gaps in existing processes where communication is required but complex (another good place for a conference or webinar).

Of course, there's a catch to CEBP: To successfully change business processes, you have to know what they are in the first place—and where roadblocks and key junctures lie. That's not always easy, and it requires experts with deep knowledge of either vertical businesses or horizontal applications (or both). Once companies figure out where to improve business processes, the key to success is better development of open engines that allow communications applications to literally plug-and-play into business software— whether horizontal (like salesforce.com or SAP) or vertical (and related to specific industries). That way, business apps can do what they do best—with the communications built right in.

The goal is to deliver a high-quality desktop audio and video conferencing experience from any software application—and to do that, companies must ensure that their vendors are using proven technology from an experienced and reliable provider. Otherwise, companies run the risk of communications that don't work at the time they're needed most—that is, at key junctures in a business process. If, in order to move forward on a complex customer order, a sales person needs to conference with his manager, his supplier and his shipping department, he must be able to access conferencing technology that will deliver a clear, reliable meeting every time.

Beyond simply initiating an audio or video call, companies should look for technology that can perform trans-rating and trans-coding tasks. Also important are scalability, security, bandwidth management, firewall traversal and audio/video synchronization. Finally, SIP standards and the ability to support any endpoint are critical to success in this constantly changing market.