

Integration is Critical for Unified Enterprise Communications **By Melanie Turek, Industry Principal, Frost & Sullivan**

As more companies deploy a variety of communications and collaboration technologies to an ever-expanding list of employees, integration and interoperability are key to success. Unified communications combines a variety of real-time and asynchronous communications tools in a single user interface, letting employees access all their communications with a single mouse click. UC apps typically include audio conferencing, desktop video conferencing, Web conferencing, instant messaging, unified messaging and other advanced voice capabilities, and presence information, as well as integration with e-mail and Microsoft Office applications.

The goal is to allow users to choose the communications media that's right for any given interaction, then "escalate" that communication (say, from a chat to a phone call, or a phone call to a videoconference) with a click of the mouse. And CXOs clearly see value in such integration. In a study of more than 100 global C-level executives, 64 percent said UC improves productivity, 77 percent said it enhances employee mobility, 74 percent said it speeds decision making, and 69 percent said it reduces travel and improves employees' work/life balance.

But integration is also important among applications and endpoints within a single communications medium. For instance, companies may have a variety of videoconferencing endpoints, built on an infrastructure designed by a number of vendors (including a mix of MCUs, gateways, and so on). To achieve maximum return on investment—and enable collaboration among the largest number of employees—companies must integrate those disparate systems, so that a user can place a videoconference as easily as he would a phone call, regardless of the device he's on, and regardless of what kinds of endpoints his colleagues are using. This is true across video endpoints, so that a group of people using a room-based system should be able to connect with desktop videoconferencing user, quickly and easily.

On the applications front, companies should look for SIP-based technology as much as possible to support their integration efforts. SIP is the defacto standard for software-based enterprise communications, and companies that want to deploy UC will need to support the protocol to connect a variety of applications from more than one vendor. That said, much of the integration work done today requires heavy (custom) lifting, since most vendors still use "flavors" of SIP that are effectively proprietary tweaks to the standard protocol. As a result; it is not a simple matter, for instance, to integrate Cisco Call Manager and Microsoft Office Communication Server and the Communicator client.

Things are easier in the videoconferencing world, where standards are more mature and more readily supported by all the leading vendors. To deliver interoperability among a variety of room-based and desktop systems, companies should deploy standards-based technology, including systems that support H.323, H.264, H.239 and SIP as appropriate. To enable a conference among multiple sites—even if they're all built on the same network, with the same technology—companies will need to deploy Multipoint Control

Units (MCUs). And to enable videoconferences with suppliers, partners and customers—who reside outside the corporate network—companies should deploy solutions that allow for firewall traversal. Finally, if a company has a mix of older and newer videoconferencing technology in place, with will need Gateways to deliver clear voice and video connectivity between IP and ISDN networks.