WHITE PAPER

The Business Benefits of Upgrading Legacy IP
Communications Systems

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IP telephony has become the foundation of business communications across industry sectors. Organizations of all sizes continue to replace traditional PBXs with IP-based phone systems. Research firm In-Stat has predicted that IP telephony penetration among U.S. businesses will reach 79 percent in 2013, compared to 42 percent at the end of 2009. According to Infonetics Research, hybrid IP-PBXs account for nearly two-thirds of the PBX market, with pure IP-PBXs accounting for nearly one-third and growing at a rate of 4 percent.

That said, many organizations that have made the initial switch to IP telephony have not continued to invest in system upgrades. This is due in part to economic conditions and in part to perceptions surrounding PBX equipment. Traditionally, phone systems have been considered long-term investments with a useful life far exceeding that of most computer equipment. In an uncertain economy, many organizations have opted to delay spending on phone system upgrades because existing equipment continues to get the job done.

It is true that a robust IP phone system will continue to meet basic business needs for many years. However, organizations that put off IP communications system upgrades are missing out on numerous financial and operational benefits. Current IP-PBXs can drive significant cost savings while improving the reliability, scalability and flexibility of the enterprise communications infrastructure. Upgrades also mitigate the risk associated with older, unsupported phone systems.

In addition, IP telephony technology has advanced rapidly in recent years, offering a host of features simply unavailable in earlier systems. Unified communications, in particular, can increase productivity, improve processes, and cut travel and facilities costs by enabling employees to work from anywhere. In addition, the latest IP communications platforms support today's mobile workforce and the proliferation of user-owned devices.

This paper discusses the evolution of IP-PBX technology and examines the key reasons for upgrading from older solutions. While it is applicable to any legacy IP telephony environment, it focuses on the benefits of upgrading to the latest version of Cisco's Unified Communications Manager platform.

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ENHANCING PRODUCTIVITY AND THE USER EXPERIENCE

Many of the productivity-enhancing features previously available only in expensive, top-of-the-line PBX equipment come standard with IP communications systems. These features include advanced call routing, "find me/follow me" call forwarding, call waiting, three-way calling, voicemail and caller ID. In addition, IP telephony offers unified messaging features that integrate voicemail, email and fax. And by enabling end-users to plug their IP phones into any available data port, IP phone systems enable greater flexibility and efficiency.

Studies attempting to quantify productivity benefits have found that unified messaging can provide 25 to 40 minutes of added employee productivity each day by reducing the amount of time spent checking messages. The latest IP communications solutions take the productivity-enhancing benefits of IP telephony to the next level, with enhanced voice and unified messaging as well as a wide range of speech-activated productivity tools.

The integration of IP telephony with business-critical applications also drives consistent, measurable improvements in business process. Employees can nurture customer relationships through instant access to customer data through customer relationship management software, or quickly gain access to relevant supply chain data when communicating with suppliers.

Advanced Phone Sets. Older versions of Cisco Unified Communications Manager cannot support the latest desktop phone sets with high-resolution color displays and improved voice quality. Customers with these older versions need to upgrade in order to take advantage of state-of-the-art video phones and other advanced endpoints, including Cisco Unified IP Phones. These phones offer easy access to a number of productivity-enhancing features, including directory services and built-in video conferencing. Greater utilization of features by end-user serves to boost the ROI of the system.

Cisco Unified Communications Widgets. Cisco Unified Communications Manager can be integrated with desktop productivity applications through widgets that support click-to-call within Microsoft Office, Internet Explorer, Outlook and SharePoint applications. The Click to Call application streamlines business communications and instant access to the history of the calls placed from within a given application. Cisco Unified Communications Widgets are not supported by older versions of Cisco Unified Communications Manager.

ENABLING BRING YOUR OWN DEVICE (BYOD) AND COLLABORATION

The proliferation of user-owned mobile devices in the workplace has upped the ante for IP communications. Support for a wide range of mobile devices empowers organizations to create a more productive, responsive and accessible workforce by extending the full power of an IP desk phone and unified communications capabilities to the mobile user. Users gain single-number access to their desk phone, cell phone and other mobile devices, so they can be reached regardless of location. Dual persona features separate personal and business identities on a single mobile device.

Seamless and automatic selection of the best available network — Wi-Fi or cellular — enables users to communicate from anywhere and helps enterprises reduce their overall telecom costs by reducing international roaming and direct dial costs on mobile devices. Mobile device support also allows organizations to rightsize the number of IP desk phones by giving employees the option to use mobile phones exclusively.

IP telephony enables a number of real-time collaboration tools that help boost productivity, speed decision-making and accelerate innovation. Collaboration tools also enhance customer service through greater employee access and more flexible interactions. Videoconferencing technologies help reduce travel time and costs by replacing many face-to-face meetings with effective alternatives.

Customers who upgrade their IP phone systems are better positioned to take advantage of advanced mobility and collaboration applications:

Presence. Presence provides a simple way for mobile workers to easily and securely find the right people, to see if and on what device they are available, and to collaborate using their preferred method or device. Cisco Jabber is a unified communications application that brings together presence, instant messaging (IM), desktop sharing, conferencing and other features into a single, consistent experience across PCs, Macs, tablets and smartphones. Through the Jabber for Everyone program, the Cisco Jabber client is available at no additional cost to customers with Cisco Unified Communications Manager 7.1 or later.

Conferencing and Collaboration Technologies. With Cisco Unified Communications Integration for Cisco WebEx Connect, users can instantly connect and collaborate with colleagues across locations and time zones. The latest version of Cisco Unified Communications Manager also provides seamless access to advanced audio and video conferencing, including Cisco TelePresence applications.

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BUILDING UPON IT OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCIES

Deploying IP communications brings immediate operational advantages because voice communications are routed over the data network. IT organizations need only manage and maintain one network instead of two. In addition, simplified moves, adds and changes increase IT staff efficiency.

Pure IP telephony systems require less equipment and cabling than traditional PBXs, and are simpler to administer. As a result, IT organizations spend less time managing telephone equipment and can open new offices more quickly.

Current IP communications platforms deliver further IT operational efficiencies:

Virtualization. Customers can now deploy Cisco Unified Communications Manager and related software on virtual machines. As a result, customers can gain all the benefits of virtualization for their communication platform — a smaller data center footprint, lower power and cooling requirements, reduced operational costs and greater flexibility. It further enables customers to maximize their virtualization strategies, and streamlines the deployment of voice applications.

Appliance Deployment. Since 2006, Cisco Unified Communications Manager has been based upon an appliance deployment model. This model simplifies installation, upgrades and patching, reducing the impact on IT staff and the production environment. It also eliminates reliance on Microsoft Windows, which requires frequent updates to address security risks. The latest version of Cisco Unified Communications Manager runs in a Red Hat Linux environment that is more stable and easier to maintain.

REDUCING RISK

Some organizations have been hesitant to deploy IP telephony systems out of concern that they would not provide the "five 9s" reliability of traditional PBXs. Yet IP communications systems have proven to be highly reliable — often even more reliable than aging PBXs.

IP phone systems leverage the decentralized design of the Internet to enable fault tolerance and adaptive routing. The distributed nature of IP telephony further allows organizations to disperse equipment throughout the network and duplicate systems for redundancy. Redundant IP-PBXs and/or backup telco connections can provide failover for remote sites accessing the enterprise IP-PBX via a WAN.

As with any equipment, however, the reliability of an IP telephony system begins to fade with age. Organizations with equipment that is no longer supported by the manufacturer are especially at risk. By upgrading, organizations can eliminate this concern and take advantage of advanced fault tolerance features:

Continued Product Support. Under Cisco's product lifecycle structure, products are no longer supported five years after they reach end of life. Several older versions of Cisco Unified Communications Manager are both end of life and end of support, creating serious risk for customers that continue to rely upon these products. If a problem were to arise, an emergency upgrade would be required. Upgrading now eliminates this risk.

Greater Resiliency. Customers who upgrade enjoy better resiliency and disaster recovery capabilities. Clustering over the WAN enables a highly available design with servers distributed across data center locations. Customers gain geographic redundancy and failover yet have a single cluster to administer. Active and inactive partitions allow for efficient upgrades with minimal downtime as well as the ability to fall back if the upgrade does not perform as expected.

CONCLUSION

By converging voice and data onto a single network, IP telephony delivers a number of benefits, including cost savings, productivity gains, improved customer satisfaction and reduced risk. IP communications provides a better communication experience while increasing the operational efficiency of the IT department. It also brings greater efficiency to end-users through advanced call-handling features, collaboration tools and integration with other business applications.

IP telephony technology has not remained stagnant. The demand-driven market for IP phone systems has compelled manufacturers to continually enhance their products with new features and functionality. Organizations with older IP phone systems are missing out on the business benefits of these new systems.

Organizations that upgrade their IP telephony platforms can gain competitive advantages while reducing the complexity and risk associated with legacy architectures. They can also better support today's mobile workforce and enable improved collaboration and customer interaction. The latest solutions further streamline the data center infrastructure and provide a simpler upgrade path in the future. While an existing IP phone system may still "do the job," there is a compelling business case for upgrading to a newer platform.

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About FusionStorm

FusionStorm delivers best-of-breed technology solutions that give our customers a competitive edge. Our deep technical expertise and business acumen enable us to design and implement solutions aligned with each customer's unique business requirements. We maintain the highest certifications from industry leaders and offer an array of services designed to maximize the efficiency of our customers' operations.

Headquartered in San Francisco, FusionStorm has offices and data centers across the globe, and a culture that emphasizes long-term relationships. By partnering with FusionStorm, customers gain a team of seasoned professionals with a track record of success and an unwavering commitment to customer satisfaction.

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