



How Small and Midsize Professional Services Firms Can Use Unified Communications to Maximize Success

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Introduction

Attorneys, accountants, real estate agents, consultants and other professionals within small and midsize services firms have always needed the ability to deliver services that will differentiate them from their competitors. Today, the need has taken on a new urgency. To say the economy is teetering precariously or that competition is fierce is to understate the marketplace; for many small and midsize firms a single client won or lost can significantly impact short-and long-term business health.

Factor in today's mobile society and it becomes more important than ever to consider how your partners and key associates can continue to collaborate with each other to meet or exceed client expectations when everyone is on the move and in diverse locations — at the courthouse, at client locations, in the car, traveling or otherwise away from their office desks.

Staffing is the single largest expense in almost any business. Adding employees to help bring in new business (and revenue) or to encourage existing clients to increase spending is a time-honored strategy. But it comes with certain risks. Should results fall short, the consequences can be severe.

How can you increase revenue while improving customer satisfaction, without expanding your workforce? This paper explores a strategy that every firm has at its disposal: the wise use of today's sophisticated unified communications solutions.

Unified communications

A history of IP (or internet protocol)-based communications solutions is beyond the scope of this paper. Rest assured, however, that what was once considered "bleeding-edge" (subject to the ups-and-downs of developing technology) is today a fully mainstream technology that achieves the highest levels of reliability. It far surpasses the capabilities traditional phone systems could ever hope to deliver.

The bottom line: if you are holding on to your aging PBX system in the hopes of eeking out additional functionality to increase competitiveness or productivity, you should reconsider. The fact is, if your current phone system is more than three years old it will be more expensive to operate and maintain than a new system, will lack in functionality, limit your options for future growth, and provide for a greater risk of sudden downtime.

So how exactly can an IP-based communications solution (one that unifies your communications) help your associates be more accessible to clients and generate more revenue for the business? Let's take a look.

Go mobile - with one number

Virtually everyone has a mobile phone today. In fact, most professionals have multiple devices on which they can be reached: office phone, home phone, cell



or smart phone, fax machine, pager, etc. With so many choices, the question is not whether clients are able to reach your associates, it's how to make it simple and easy to do so.

With a unified communications solution like Avaya IP Office, any frustration clients may have had about how to quickly reach associates disappears. Associates give out just one number – their office number – and calls ring simultaneously on all (or some) of their designated devices; users decide which devices they want to include. That's the only number clients need to know. So regardless of where you are – on the road, in the office but away from your desk, at home, at a client's facility – associates are easily accessible.

Work is not a place you go to, it's what you do

In a professional services environment, few spend the bulk of their day at a desk; they're moving about the office, coming and going from client meetings, traveling, and taking early morning or late evening calls from home or on the road.

To ensure they're serving clients to the best of their ability – and maximizing the success of your business – your associates need to be able to work productively no matter where they happen to be. And today that means going well beyond just making and receiving phone calls.

Today's unified communications systems can deliver the same productivity-enhancing features you get at your desktop PC, right on your mobile phone. These include instant messaging to people in your office, the ability to see who's available and who's not (presence), visual voice mail (which lets you easily prioritize messages so you listen to the most important ones first), as well as the ability to create conference calls on the fly.

For most businesses having these kinds of capabilities in the palm of your hand (literally) is a game-changer. Making associates more accessible means more efficient flow of information to make faster, better decisions. Client frustration is reduced.

Furthermore, for those who travel internationally, a "softphone" for their PC not only keeps them accessible, it can offer tremendous cost savings. Connecting to free Wi-Fi links in hotel rooms or common areas turns your PC into your office phone – calls can be made or received directly on your PC without incurring roaming charges or exorbitant hotel fees. You're connected and accessible, without additional costs.

In the office

Every small or midsize professional services firm has a headquarters; many also have branch offices. Ensuring seamless operations is a key to success from a number of perspectives. Not only are in-office staff there to support mobile employees, they're responsible for performing tasks like customer billing that keep the business running. Automating those tasks, or reducing the time they need to spend with them, can deliver efficiencies that will save money and allow you to re-deploy staff to handle more important jobs, often ones with revenue generating impact.

Track your time, record your calls

Certain tasks are closely associated with specific industries, and professional services firms are no exception; you have your own unique needs.



Billing for time spent working with and on behalf of clients can be one. Of course, time is money in every business. But it's particularly evident in the professional services realm where attorneys, consultants, and accountants often directly bill clients for their time. Similarly, some businesses are required to record all phone calls – in financial services or other regulated industries for instance – for compliance purposes or to ensure proper handling of customers.

Applications for the Avaya IP Office system, either built right into the system itself or created by authorized third-party developers, can automate many of these tasks, saving time and enhancing revenue. Call accounting, is an example; with the press of a button on their desk phone, staff will know exactly how much time they've spent on the phone on behalf of clients, down to the minute. The system can automatically generate reports for client billing. No guesswork, no opportunities for lost revenue.

Call recording is built into the Avaya IP Office solution. How much do you currently pay to a service provider, per month, for the ability to record calls? The flexibility in IP Office to record all calls or record them on-demand makes it simple and flexible. Also, recorded calls are saved as electronic files, so they can be emailed to associates and archived for later retrieval. What was once a cumbersome, and at times expensive, capability becomes easy to facilitate.

Integrating with office applications

Avaya IP Office offers the ability to integrate communications capabilities within existing desktop applications, like Microsoft Outlook, that people use every day.

With IP Office, the ability to chat or send instant messages, as well as see the “presence” of other associates, can be integrated right into Microsoft Outlook – users get those capabilities without having to switch out of that interface. You'll see who's “on the phone”, “away”, or on “do not disturb”; then act accordingly. Integrating communications with this ubiquitous application helps information to flow more quickly and keep decision-making from getting bogged down.

Multi-location practices

As noted, many professional services firms maintain more than one office, usually a headquarters and one or more branch offices that place associates within a local market. It's in those kinds of situations that unified communications can provide added benefits.

Resources can be shared across locations, reducing costs. For instance, IP Office enables a single receptionist to handle the calls for multiple sites using a PC interface. With just a click of the mouse, a receptionist can transfer calls regardless of where he or she is physically located or to which location the calls needs to be routed. Call handling is streamlined and simplified.

Administrators managing multiple sites also benefit by being able to make moves, adds and changes from any internet-connected device, wherever they happen to be. The result: changes can be made more quickly, providing key personal in various locations with the communications tools they need, and costs are reduced by eliminating the need for administrators at each site.

Fuoco Group

Fuoco Group LLP, a 70-employee accounting and business consulting firm, needed an advanced, reliable communications platform to help increase their productivity, seamlessly link three offices, allow for mobile communications, and improve productivity, while not suffering from the downtime and inefficiencies they were experiencing with their previous system.

“Reliability is an extremely important consideration for us,” says Joseph P. Manzelli Jr., CPA, CITP, partner and director of operations. “We suffered through days and weeks at a time with our systems down, when everyone had to do business on their personal cell phones. We never want to experience anything like that again.”

Avaya IP Office met the company’s current needs and will grow with them. The system enables Fuoco Group to:

- Enhance connectivity with mobility features that enable one-number accessibility and remote phone setup
- Reduce downtime with system reliability and rapid deployment
- Improve operational efficiency with one-touch telephones, PC-based operator console, and teleconferencing capabilities
- Gain productivity through time savings in administration, reachability, and features such as speed dialing, caller ID, and conference calling

“Our Avaya IP Office solution is the best investment our firm has ever made,” says Manzelli. “Even our most demanding users are happy with it and, as IT director, I have a high level of confidence in its performance. Right now it’s saving us money and delivering exactly what we need, and it has the capacity to keep pace with any new applications that we will require for many years to come.”

About Avaya

Avaya is a global provider of business collaboration and communications solutions, providing unified communications, contact centers, data solutions and related services to companies of all sizes around the world. For more information please visit www.avaya.com.

Conclusion

For many professional services firms moving to a communications-based strategy to help improve competitiveness and customer service represents a paradigm shift. Yet as this paper demonstrates, a unified communications solution can deliver significant benefits to customer service, in addition to enhancing revenue and profitability.

Some people find it difficult to look beyond the cost of a new system. With that in mind, it's important to quantify the total cost of ownership benefits of a new system. Consider all the areas it can affect your business: lower maintenance and administrative costs because IP Office can be primarily managed in-house; improved reliability (can you calculate the cost of an older system that unexpectedly crashes and makes it difficult for clients to reach you?); the new capabilities that improve the speed and efficiency of your key associates; the customer loyalty improvements you can gain from making associates more accessible to clients and each other. The list goes on.

In summary, a new unified communications solution can deliver dramatic improvements in customer service, associate productivity/efficiency, while keeping costs under control.

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