The Unified Communications Imperative

It's time to meet your staff and residents wherever they are.

Introduction

Government agencies can struggle to meet resident expectations in a world where videoconferencing, file sharing and 24/7/365 communication are the norm. Unified communications (UC) technology breaks down silos that frustrate government employees and residents. Intelligent, cloud-based UC solutions eliminate on-premises hardware and integrate communication channels around a single platform to improve collaboration, simplify management of systems and help governments meet their residents wherever they are.

UC consolidates multiple communication channels into a single platform to improve the user experience, simplify management and strengthen security.

The UC Advantage

State and local governments often use multiple communication tools, ranging from dated phone systems to standalone messaging and videoconferencing applications. Changing resident expectations and the shift to hybrid workplaces have magnified the shortcomings of this approach. During the pandemic, for example, individual agencies or departments deployed their own videoconferencing solutions, each of which must be managed, updated and assessed for security concerns.

UC consolidates disparate communication channels while strengthening security and consistency. UC technology — which originally focused on converging telephony and internet — now encompasses secure videoconferencing, messaging, file sharing, and cloud-based platforms that manage and orchestrate communications for employees and residents.

Supporting government workforces: Intelligent, cloud-based UC platforms can automatically route calls to workers whether they are in the office, at home or in the field. They enable collaboration through file sharing, virtual whiteboards and AI-powered meeting tools. UC platforms can also push emergency messages to all employees via phone, text or instant message.
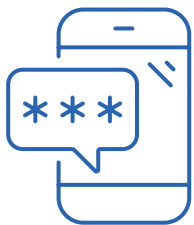
Meeting residents where they are: Through cloud-powered call center technology, UC platforms let residents communicate with government agencies via phone, online chat or videoconferencing. UC also offers convenient features, such as giving residents a call-back option instead of waiting on hold, that help government agencies match the capabilities of private sector retailers.

Reducing internal workloads: Intelligent UC platforms streamline routine administrative tasks, such as reassigning phone numbers to new employees or changing names in employee directories.

Selecting The Right Solution

Here are best practices for jurisdictions that are exploring UC adoption:

Assess your infrastructure: UC solutions have varying capabilities, and choosing the right platform and approach depends on your agency's unique needs and existing network infrastructure. Start by assessing your current network capacity. High-quality fiber connectivity is essential to support voice communications and video tools at peak times.

Understand your IT environment: You'll need to determine if it's better to maintain your existing on-premises hardware and legacy systems or work with a vendor to replace them. While modern UC platforms can connect with hundreds of business applications, it's important to catalog your applications and make sure they easily integrate with the platform you select.

Know your internal IT capacity: Determine how much of ongoing operations you will handle in house. Depending on your agency's existing hardware and IT staff capacity, you may want to consider a fully managed UC solution or a co-managed solution in which your agency shares management responsibilities with a vendor in clearly defined ways.

Evaluate vendor experience and capabilities: Given the mission-critical nature of government communications, you need a vendor with public sector experience and rapid-response capabilities to ensure availability of services when problems arise. Response requirements are commonly spelled out in a service-level agreement (SLA). Also assess the vendor's ability to build and support networks and infrastructure across a full range of communication technologies, from office phones to messaging applications on employee computers and smartphones.

Demand security and compliance: Look for solutions with built-in encryption for messaging, conferencing and file sharing, along with additional features, such as firewalls and malware protection. UC platforms should also comply with relevant regulations, including Federal Communications Commission (FCC) requirements that every phone can be connected to a precise location to aid first responders and that publicly accessible phones can dial 911 without needing a prefix to access an outside line.

Consider user experience: UC platforms should include features that streamline management and improve the employee and resident experience. For example, some platforms allow governments to prioritize the most critical network traffic, such as allocating more bandwidth to voice calls to ensure quality.

Create a roadmap: Once you select a vendor, work closely with them to develop a solution strategy. Key components include the design of the network, the approach to deployment and installation, and how the platform will be managed and supported.

Don't overlook training: Training is an essential component of deploying a UC solution. Invest in training for IT staff who will administer the solution and for end users who may need to learn how to use new phones and applications on their personal computing devices.

The Risk Of Waiting

For many agencies, the biggest challenge around UC adoption may be justifying the replacement of reliable but aging systems. Some agencies still use analog PBX phone networks, which were so expensive to install that it's difficult to justify their replacement until they fail.

But aging communication systems bring considerable risks. They cost more to maintain each year — and when these critical systems do fail, they can leave agencies unable to respond to residents and scrambling to find a solution. Siloed legacy platforms also won't meet the needs of evolving government workforces and rising resident expectations.

That's why it's so important to begin planning your transition to modern, intelligent UC platforms now.

Aging communication systems bring considerable risks, including potential failure, rising maintenance costs and the inability to adapt to changing needs.

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