

CONVERGENCE AND THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESELLERS

Convergence is a potentially disruptive technology because it changes working practices; therefore end users perceive complexity and need expert support. Many resellers also perceive convergence as a complex area and there are still comparatively few resellers who understand all the elements - voice, data, QoS, network implications, mobile and security.

While many data resellers have been slow to capitalise on the voice elements, many voice resellers have been very slow to embrace the move from TDM to an IP and data based converged environment.

The benefits and take up of convergence have been consistently over-hyped for the last decade and this has led to skepticism and fatigue both in the channel and end user community, restricting most implementations to enterprises.

However with falling prices and reductions in complexity, there are now significant opportunities for the channel to sell to smaller organisations. For resellers the training requirements aren't onerous and will equip them to deliver high margin services.

There is a particularly good opportunity in the mid-range and SME market because the benefits of convergence haven't really reached this area yet.

Customers are intuitively aware that integrating elements of their fixed networks and mobile networks could provide benefits, but they may be a bit fuzzy on the details. And there are stated worries over security, a reluctance to migrate from TDM investment, and concerns regarding QoS.

What exactly is 'Convergence?'

'Convergence' tends to mean different things to different people. It's difficult to define and difficult to pinpoint particular applications.

Convergence is certainly, practically speaking, not about the unified comms dream of people wandering about with pictures on think pads or having web cams on their foreheads. Key areas are voice/data convergence and fixed/mobile phone convergence, which provide practical benefits to users and the ability to save money.

Convergence can be about integrating a phone system into relevant business systems. For example, linking CRM systems with voice so when a customer calls, the employee is taken straight into the customer's account on answering the phone, or getting voice mail sent to your pc.

It can be where fixed and mobile systems are integrated in the office at the switchboard, providing ease of call transfer and minimising mobile call charges. Or where calls can be easily transferred around to internal, remote and mobile users, maximising productivity.

Applications are as broad as customers' working environments, but there is a common thread. Most SMEs implement solutions to meet a specific, usually tactical requirement. However, they have a determination to ensure that the chosen solution will also be able to grow with their requirements and meet their future needs.

There is, therefore, a key role for the VAR in explaining what the possibilities are for the customer to gain benefits from merging voice/data and fixed/mobile systems. And a role describing and providing a system which can fulfill both the customer's immediate needs and their potential future needs.

There are various ways into convergence and, with customers having a wide range of requirements, it is important to partner with suppliers who can meet those requirements across organisations, from large to small. Suppliers such as Samsung provide a range of options to satisfy differing needs.

Samsung Ubigate, for example, lets users retain their investment in their existing legacy PBX, but significantly upgrade functionality by adding secure VoIP and mobile services.

For those with an immediate need for greater fixed/mobile functionality, there are more sophisticated solutions available.

For some users, a hosted solution provides an easier route into convergence, allowing them to perhaps start at a low cost by providing converged facilities for their mobile or remote users and adding on more services as and when required.

Reseller Support and Training

At Wick Hill we see significant opportunities for those resellers looking to leverage their existing skills and add to those skills, whether they are voice or data focused. They will then be in a position to take competitive advantage of the growth of convergence and able to service customers who increasingly require broader knowledge in a converged environment.

We provide the support resellers need to engage in convergence deals with confidence. We have our own custom training centre and accredited trainers who can offer both technical and sales training on convergence. We also provide pre-sales, technical and sales support to help resellers, particularly with the early sales.

We think it is an excellent time for resellers to enter this market and are working with our suppliers to increase the size of the market opportunity and the number of leads so that our channel partners can profitably grow in this expanding area.

Ian Kilpatrick is chairman of value added distributor Wick Hill Group plc, specialists in secure infrastructure solutions. Kilpatrick has been involved with the Group for more than 30 years. Wick Hill is an international organisation supplying SMEs and most of the Times Top 1000 companies through a value-added network of accredited resellers.

Kilpatrick has an in-depth experience of computing with a strong vision of the future in IT. He looks at computing from a business point-of-view and his approach reflects his philosophy that business benefits and ease-of-use are the key factors in IT, rather than just technology. He has authored numerous articles and publications, as well as being a regular speaker at conferences, exhibitions and seminars.

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