The changing world of unified communications
In this e-guide:

Unified communications, or UC, defined by TechTarget’s WhatIs team as “a framework for integrating various communication tools with the goal of enhancing business communication, collaboration and productivity” has come a long way since its first appearance over a decade ago, and is now a well-established element of the IT department’s toolkit, indeed, one could argue it is essential.

But while UC is now a fixture, innovation never slows down, and as one of the most visible elements of the enterprise IT stack to the average employee, UC tools are constantly being enhanced with new features and capabilities.

We begin our look at the evolving world of UC with a recap of some of the highlights from a packed agenda at this year’s UC Expo event, which was held at the ExCeL in London at the end of May.
One of the big themes emerging in the wider world of IT – not just in UC – is the introduction of artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning and other automation features. At first glance you might not think there’s much of a play for AI in the world of UC, but you’d be wrong – there are a number of trends now in play that actually, make AI perfect for UC. As one analyst puts it, the intersection of AI and UC is all about “helping people do their jobs better by letting machines interpret data and analyse information faster” – and as Christian Annesley finds out there are a number of trends now in play that actually make AI and UC perfect bedfellows.

Then, Rene Millman looks in-depth at some of the changes underway in the UC-as-a-service, or UCaaS space, which is seeing revolution of its own as legacy UC systems are phased out and replaced by cloud-delivered services. Analysts at Gartner predict that two years from now, 90% of all new UC purchases will be cloud-based UCaaS, up from 50% in 2018, so the time is right for buyers to get under the skin of this particular trend.
Finally, we explore the changing face of enterprise collaboration. As workforces get more mobile and spend less time in the office, one pain point for the IT department is figuring out just how to keep the lines of communication open in an appropriate manner. We find out if enterprise social media platforms hold the answer.

**Alex Scroxton**, networking editor
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**UC Expo 2019: Experts talk up future tech in unified communications**

Rene Millman, guest contributor

In the future, artificial intelligence (AI) will become a greater part of an enterprise’s unified communications (UC) infrastructure, but for all the talk of innovation at this year’s UC Expo, there are some who question whether this technology, and others beside, will ever make it out of a supplier’s demo lab and be used for real within organisations.

It seems that, in a bid to steer clear of the hype surrounding AI, many suppliers are starting to hit the thesaurus and come up with terms that sound a bit like it, but don’t say so outright – this is possibly a wise strategy.

In a keynote speech to kick off the conference, Amy Chang, senior vice-president of Cisco’s collaboration technology group, talked up the concept of “cognitive collaboration”. Chang was keen to point out that what Cisco was offering was not some kind of vapourware years off into the horizon, but something customers could use today.

In a demo, Chang showed how this cognitive collaboration worked. The example was given where, in a meeting, participants would have access to all
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the relevant information about others attending at their fingertips. Not only would you be able to see their name and job title, but technology would intelligently scour the internet to collate info on attendees and present it in a digestible format – rather like a souped-up cross between LinkedIn and creepy stalking.

“What we created was a super scale data ingestion engine, which every nanosecond of the day is on the hunt for anything about a person or company,” said Chang.

So good is this technology that Chang reckons that if a person has a common name, such as Amy, it will present data on the right Amy with about 97% accuracy. This should make for shorter meetings, presumably, as a lot of small talk is ejected.

Future of chatbots

In a later panel discussion on the state of UC, there was a lot of talk about AI emerging in the unified sphere, but Dave Michels, principal analyst at TalkingPointz, appeared to rule out chatbots from that future. “Chatbots don’t work,” he said. But there was an abundance of innovation in his opinion. Although there was no great leap forward, there were plenty of small steps, with “innovation coming from the smaller companies”.

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This point was echoed by Dominic Black, senior analyst at Cavell Group, who said innovation was coming from smaller companies that were more agile and building their own apps, specifically on user experience.

Bill Haskins, senior analyst and partner at Wainhouse, said big companies were still innovating – driven by market pressure – but this innovation was across the stack and not focused on specific niches within those stacks. However, the barriers facing big company innovation with UC were maintaining backwards compatibility and ensuring integration within a supplier’s platform, he said.

Whether the innovation is coming from big or small players, Blair Pleasant, president and principal analyst at Commfusion, said companies should think less about the technological innovation and focus on what they are trying to achieve.

She said that since the 1990s, companies have had access to tech such as screen pops, which show information about a caller to a customer service agent. The technology has been around for years, but some companies still find it hard to implement. So, never mind what AI is promising, organisations are still struggling to get to grips with decades-old stuff.

“When you are talking to vendors that are talking about great innovations such as how AI is going to help automate everything and make it easier, just think about what you are trying to accomplish and what your company’s goals are for
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... your employees and your customers,” said Pleasant. “Don’t buy into the latest cutting-edge technologies – just focus on your goals.”

The final panel discussion of the day centred on future trends in UC. Katie Gibbs, head of AI at BJSS, said there is a shift in using AI within UC to intelligence augmentation, where the technology “can enhance the way staff operate”.

Another “exciting opportunity” for AI is using the tech to “combine visibility into every single channel the customer uses”, said Gibbs. So, rather than just having a customer deal with a chatbot, AI would be used to understand “every single interaction a customer has with an organisation”, be that online or in a branch. The use of AI would lead to a more personalised service for customers, she said.

Increasing automation will enable customers to spend their time interacting with companies using a variety of communications methods. Simon Burckhardt, UK managing director of Vonage, said CCaaS (contact centre as a service) will be a “game changer” in the way businesses communicate with their customer bases, “particularly businesses with a large B2C customer base, because what it enables you to do is to program into your customer communication processes methods of communicating with them via messaging, SMS or via voice, in a way that doesn’t involve a human interface”.

...
Burckhardt highlighted companies such as Uber and Booking.com as examples of where customers don’t ring them up, but use an app or website for virtually all interactions with these companies. He pointed out that his daughters buy clothes from ASOS, never from a shop, and don’t know how to use a call centre – all contact is via email and text messaging.

“There is a generational divide,” he said. “I don’t think anyone under 30 expects to call a business – they expect to deal with them online in some kind of messaging format. You have to look at that as a way of changing your business.”

Burckhardt added that embracing how the next generation communicates with businesses now will help companies become the Uber of their industry sector or prevent them from losing out to an Uber-like competitor in the future.
Rise of the machines: How AI is changing unified communications

Christian Annesley, guest contributor

There is more and more talk these days about how unified communications (UC) is set to be transformed by artificial intelligence (AI) – with the topic getting plenty of airtime at this year’s UC Expo in London in May. So is AI ready to come out of the lab and into live UC environments? And to what extent is it having an impact already?

One strand of activity was presented in a neat example from Cisco at the 2019 UC Expo. Amy Chang, senior vice-president of the firm’s collaboration technology group, demonstrated on how “cognitive collaboration” can improve a virtual meeting by giving participants useful information about others in attendance, with intelligence gathered by bots from social media and other online sources. So that’s one real AI-derived benefit that appears poised to land.

The UC space has also changed substantially in the past two years. With the likes of Microsoft fully engaged, it is now about so much more than voice over IP (VoIP), video conferencing and instant messaging. Technology such as interactive whiteboards, team spaces and document management all sit
beneath the UC umbrella – and we can add AI-driven chatbots to that burgeoning list, with a remit to help users who are increasingly likely to need help with an excess of data.

“The intersection of UC and AI is all about helping people do their jobs better by letting machines interpret data and analyse information faster,” said independent network analyst Zeus Kerravala in a keynote address at UC Expo 2018, and that still holds good in 2019.

Julian Harris, head of AI technology research at knowledge network CognitionX, set some of the context for AI in UC, whether today or tomorrow, when he noted at the company’s recent CogX 2019 event that there are currently at least 700 conversational AI technologies in the marketplace.

But beyond this emerging capability at the margins, profound shifts are visible in the mainstream. Leading the way here is the fact that phone calls are in decline as a communication medium. So even if conversational AI is still in its infancy in terms of capabilities (and the experts agree it is, despite the dramatic take-up for voice-activated services using Alexa and the capabilities of Google Duplex, for example), the landscape of how individuals interact and communicate is always changing.

AI-driven voice is just one nascent element among many in a complicated, shifting space.
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How is the communications landscape on the move? Today, we can say there are declining phone calls, a growth in messaging, a parallel explosion in video calls, and – in the customer engagement space – growing call centre automation. One measure is found in WhatsApp messaging volumes, which have risen exponentially, from one billion a day in 2011 to 65 billion a day by mid-2018.

There are now more than five billion registered users for messaging platforms worldwide, with WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger the most used.

Bots and the corporation

So a lot of change is happening with communications in the wider world. But let’s now turn back specifically to UC, and AI’s application within it.

Roy Lines is an independent digital transformation specialist, with DevOps and cloud services among the tools and approaches he applies. He works with large corporates in verticals such as fast food, consumer goods, fintech and gaming, and says that when it comes to UC, AI is already having an impact.

“This is an interesting time, because chatbots can already add so much value by supplementing human communications,” he says. “They can make carrying out crucial tasks simpler and they can add to conference calls or make follow-up actions after virtual meetings easier by providing relevant information to individuals just when they need it.”
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If that’s the promise, in practice Lines has already begun using messaging and collaboration platforms such as Slack for information-sharing in more than one of his large corporate clients. By using automated bots on Slack, you can add to conversations by monitoring and delivering supporting information right on cue, says Lines.

Even more strikingly, it is straightforward to use Slack as a channel to simplify actions in a business by using AI, he says.

“In a food-delivery business, for example, sometimes a company won’t have capacity to take customer orders because of a kitchen failure – an oven is offline, say – or because of reduced delivery capacity,” says Lines. “To handle this, you can use a bot that allows Slack to be the channel to instantly reset customer booking capabilities so that they match the situation.

“The channel to do this could equally well be WhatsApp or even SMS messaging. With AI, action can be taken just through a simple text command from a phone – or else a voice instruction, potentially. Plus it provides that audit trail of actions taken – everyone in the company with access can see what action was taken, when it was taken, and what the trigger was.”

Lines says the use of AI-driven voice on conference calls is also available now, so bots can monitor a call and interject with useful supportive suggestions such as whether to circulate a particular document that backs up what is being discussed.
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“There are corporates I work with that are using this capability now,” he says. “It can just be a fact or data point, too, that the bot supplies – not always a document for circulation. It might confirm some relevant sales figures on request, for example.

“Bots are a great way of democratising data across an organisation, as so many companies are still set up only for the senior leadership to discuss financial figures, for example. A Slack channel where the CEO ends up talking to developers, middle managers and more about myriad ideas across the business can be very powerful.”

**AI and the consumer**

UC doesn’t just refer to the internal interactions in a business, but also reaches into marketing systems and customer relationships.

Richard Robinson, chief commercial officer at data-science-in-marketing business [Data Practitioners](#), says the wider communications play for UC embraces the customer experience – and AI is coming through rapidly.

“AI can boost the on-site experience for consumers and also enable personalisation – everything from visuals to chatbots to augmented reality to personalised website visits,” says Robinson. “But social listening is one area where AI is impacting things, enabling companies to be more targeted and responsive to customers.”
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When it comes to call centres and automation, the potential to tie together communications across many channels is there but has only been partially realised, he says.

“Today there are so many ways to engage – call centres, online chat, email, via online advertising, via social media. Even today, these channels are often too siloed. But AI is helping companies to knit things together into something approaching a single customer view, with consistency in the interactions as the systems learn from each other every time a customer engages.”

At a relatively basic level, AI can serve up recommendations to customers, such as the way Netflix suggests TV and films to customers based on their prior choices and actions. The next stage would be to factor in other information, such as the watcher’s mood or the time of day or the weather or some other variable. The idea is for AI to make rounded decisions and recommendations.

“We work with a luxury retailer,” says Robinson. “Through machine learning, we have helped to identify a new segment of customers that the retailer has not yet engaged with. And we have used behavioural science to improve the chances of engaging well with the customers in this group – using the right colour palette, presenting the right offer, and with the right tone of voice. The outcome? A 68% increase in sales and a 45% decrease in acquisition cost. That is the kind of difference AI can sometimes make.”
But he adds: “It is early days still. AI is making a difference – with a long way still to travel. The opportunity is clearly there for better, more human, more informed engagement with would-be customers, just as there is the opportunity for better internal communications.”

One step at a time

If the promise of many AI technologies in UC is already clear, it is also important to sound a note of caution: with many of the technologies being used today, there is still much to do.

John Taylor, CEO of Action.ai, which has developed conversational voice tools for businesses, with a particular focus on sectors such as financial services, said in an address at CogX 2019: “Our technology is excellent, and our work to help businesses transform the customer experience is happening now. But the fact is that the promise of chatbots still outstrips the reality in many regards.”

Consider a well-resourced company such as Uber, which has a chatbot that is still dogged by one-star reviews. Why? Because it is hard for this stuff to work consistently. Human language is complex and people communicate in ambiguous, informal ways much of the time. Also, it doesn’t take much for any individual to abandon a voice-activated chatbot if it’s not working.

Taylor adds: “The work involved in managing dialogue so that it delivers and an individual can talk naturally and do things like employ jargon is complicated but
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also methodical. For voice to work in specific contexts, it takes depth, but it can be done.

“It is possible to build a great customer experience with a chatbot – it just needs thought and careful design. It is starting to happen now, and Action.ai and others are part of what is a step-by-step journey.”

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Exploring UCaaS: The main benefits for enterprises

Rene Millman, guest contributor

Like many other technological advances over the past decade, the unified communications-as-a-service (UCaaS) market has experienced a speedy revolution as suppliers seek to pull in customers with shiny new features.

Legacy unified communications (UC) systems are already being phased out and replaced by cloud-delivered UCaaS.

According to Gartner, by 2021, 90% of all new UC purchases will be cloud-based UCaaS, up from 50% in 2018. Current predictions from IDC suggest that by 2020, half of all businesses will be using UCaaS services in some way.

According to Dale Vile, CEO and distinguished analyst at analyst firm Freeform Dynamics, the legacy UC market changed when Microsoft entered the market over a decade ago.

“Suddenly, UC became more of a cross-sell from email, messaging and other forms of collaboration,” he says.
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"OCS [office communication server] was a natural add-on to the on-premise Microsoft Exchange and SharePoint environment, though lots of early implementations suffered from lack of attention to underlying network requirements," he adds.

Before long, the original UC players were forming relationships with Microsoft and IBM in some very large accounts.

**Understanding UCaaS**

Vile says this background is important to bear in mind when considering the UCaaS market today.

"The conversation needs to go beyond the commonly cited benefits – move from capex [capital expenditure] to opex [operational expenditure], general lowering of costs, secure remote-access baked in, and ease of management together with increased flexibility. Such benefits of the as-a-service model are now generally well-understood," he adds.

**But why should businesses embrace UCaaS**, and what benefits will it bring?

In essence, UCaaS offers communication and collaboration services via the cloud, accessible from any device. It brings together functions such as voice and telephony, meeting solutions, messaging, presence and instant messaging in a single package. Businesses pay for what they use.
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The main benefit of UCaaS is that there is instant connectivity across devices allowing teams to continue working seamlessly.

“Beyond this, UCaaS offers both reliability and security by creating performance redundancies that protect against downtime,” says Sukamal Banerjee, corporate vice-president and head of IoT WoRKS at HCL Technologies.

“With data backed up over cloud, it keeps the business running, even in extreme situations, while service providers have measures in place to monitor networks for known threats and potential vulnerabilities.”

Vile says that UCaaS is probably best considered as part of a broader workforce-enablement strategy.

“With the continued increase in mobile and distributed working, together with the growing need to collaborate across organisational boundaries, the ‘as-as-service’ model is looking more and more attractive," he says.

**Getting the right UCaaS in your business**

But implementing UCaaS is not just about plugging in and turning on, you have to have the right tools for your business as well as the right providers.

Vile says that the big question for buyers right now is how to scope requirements.
“Do you take a best-of-breed approach and separate the various components, or jump in and commit to one of the all-encompassing collaboration suites? Each has its pros and cons,” he says.

“**Office 365** is comprehensive, but very complex with arguably too much in it for any single organisation to digest. **Google’s G-Suite**, on the other hand, still feels like a work in progress in relation to real-time collaboration, while alliance-based propositions often have gaps and disjoints.

“You could stay focused on the purely comms side of the equation, but that’s not where the market – or business users – are headed.”

Vile adds that the bottom line when considering providers is that businesses need to look at where they’ve come from – Office, customer relationship management (CRM), or call centre, for example – and who is using them today, and particularly the industries, organisation sizes and use cases with which they are aligned.

“They all have their target constituencies and their good and bad points. They also each have their own world view, and that has to fit with yours,” he says.

**The pros and cons of different UCaaS offerings**

As with all technology, UCaaS offerings are different from company to company and product to product.
Banerjee says there are three choices when it comes to UCaaS: single-tenancy, multi tenancy and the hybrid approach.

He says that single tenancy offers a customised software platform that connects to the on-premise system and/or applications.

“Though it is the more expensive solution, with the upgrade cost usually borne by the customer, it offers a higher level of security by keeping each customer’s data separate, so that downtime for one customer does not affect the other,” he says.

With multi-tenancy UCaaS technologies, software is hosted in the cloud at the service provider datacentre, and not locally. In this setup, all the UCaaS customers share a single software platform.

“The key advantages are lower cost, higher reliability and better support services – including provisioning of software upgrades. The major disadvantage of multi-tenancy, however, is that it offers fewer options for customisation,” says Banerjee.

The hybrid approach can provide the middle ground. Hybrid UCaaS systems are often the best choice for companies that already have a legacy system in use and want to transition to a cloud-based UCaaS, according to Banerjee.
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“...This approach is also used by enterprises that want to keep their data secure in a single-tenant environment, while still taking advantage of a multi-tenancy system,” he adds.

Before you implement

Before implementing a UCaaS technology in your organisation, it is important to understand the needs of your business before implementing any technology.

But UCaaS – thanks to the as-a-service model – is very simple to roll out, according to Sunny Dhami, senior director of product marketing and go-to-market for RingCentral.

“As there is no need for a huge overhaul, companies can bring-in a UCaaS product and potentially have it up and running very quickly, especially compared to on-premise systems. The product can then be integrated with a wide range of applications, including Google, Microsoft Office and Salesforce products,” he says.

Banerjee says that having a realistic plan is also essential, since moving to cloud-based UCaaS requires time and money.

“Set a realistic expectation about your ROI [return on investment], and accept that there will be a learning curve as employees and the organisation adjust to the new system,” he says.
“Choosing a reliable partner can help with this. Many managed service providers specialise in UCaaS, cloud and other emerging technologies, and can bring extensive experience in UCaaS implementation through best practices and tested frameworks.”

**Deploying UCaaS**

According to Bryan Martin, chairman and CTO at 8x8, when it comes to implementing UCaaS in an organisation, a number of steps need to be carried out.

First is to perform a site and user survey to determine networking and bandwidth requirements to understand the varying personas in the organisation so you can match them to the right user license.

There also needs to a plotting out of future call flows. Numbers have to be ported to the new UCaaS provider, then there is desk phone installation, as well as testing the system and the network.

There also has to be training of admins and users, especially on modern features such as accessing your business communications from any mobile device.

“When you’re looking for a UCaaS partner, ask them about their process for setup and implementation – you can normally gauge from the amount of detail
you receive whether this is going to be a smooth experience with that supplier,” says Martin.

“During this stage, make sure to request a dedicated project manager who will coordinate the work across the supplier and your team during the transition. This will help keep your team informed of how the project is evolving in a timely fashion.”

He adds that organisations should take advantage of user training opportunities to encourage adoption of new features across the organisation.

**The future of UCaaS**

Martin says that over the next 12 to 18 months, workforce mobility, video and chat will be as relevant as voice.

“Today’s workforce expects to be able to work from any location at any time, which sets a high bar for enterprise IT teams to deliver against. We expect to see more suppliers that can deliver a location and device-agnostic, integrated suite of video, chat and voice products that empower the workforce of tomorrow,” he says.

Banerjee says that with technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality and 5G gaining popularity among consumers, their entry into enterprise UC is the first of many steps towards a different kind of workplace.
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“Voice assistants are already being explored for doing simple tasks like controlling your telepresence systems, joining meetings and retrieving documents,” he adds.

Dhami says that in the next 18 months we’re going to see AI continue to be more embedded within UCaaS in the same way that the technology is appearing in contact centres.

“As more aspects of UCaaS become automated, we'll see products develop in a new and interesting ways, making platforms even more appealing to businesses,” he says.
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Christian Annesley, guest contributor

As workforces become more mobile and less office-bound, the question of how to keep the lines of communication open in just the right way, and ensure that things get done, is a test for many enterprises. Some are turning to enterprise social platforms for an answer.

But just how do these work best in practice? It is a broad category that is awash with an ever-evolving array of options, so the first challenge for those contemplating adoption is to know what they need and where to start.

According to analyst Gartner, too few workers know where to go online to engage with peers or partners. Only 16% of workers make daily use of collaboration tools, according to a Gartner survey of more than 3,000 workers in seven countries. Some of the remaining 84% may truly not have a need to collaborate, but certainly not all of them.

“Collaborative workspaces, enterprise social networks, unified communications, workstream collaboration, content collaboration and employee communication platforms have all been introduced with fanfare over the past few decades and
are all viable options with varying degrees of success and overlap,” says Craig Roth, a Gartner analyst with a focus on collaboration tools.

**How 1610 embraced Facebook**

One example of enterprise collaboration adoption is to be seen at 1610, a not-for-profit leisure trust that operates a range of sports and leisure facilities across 19 sites in Somerset, Dorset and north Devon. Rebecca Sawtell, head of marketing and communications for 1610, recently oversaw a project to embed the use of **Workplace by Facebook** across the organisation, which has an employed workforce of 200 plus many contractors.

“Adopting Workplace and embedding it into the business came about after lots of work at 1610 on employee engagement,” says Sawtell. “We have a young workforce and our existing intranet wasn’t getting the attention, plus it was mostly pushed-down messages.

“Finding a way to get staff involved was the key, and Workplace was identified as a natural fit. Because Facebook is a familiar platform, it also means that training on the basic functions is minimal for most staff. If staff are following groups that are relevant to their interests, it becomes easier to tailor messages and communication. The organisation can also park things that aren’t getting much pick-up, so live groups are always relevant.”
According to Sawtell, the forums on Facebook are a great way to maintain contact, such as uploading images and videos and sharing quick updates in place of email overload, and Workplace supplements 1610's existing systems. “We still use conference calling a lot, and email, but Workplace gives us another platform. You can share best practice easily, use it to drive projects, and it’s also a means to start conversations internally and see what the needs are across the business.”

Chris Giddings, marketing manager at comms agency Synergy Creative, which worked with 1610, says the development prospects for Workplace matter, too, just as they do when thinking about any comms platform.

“Like others, but not all, in the marketplace, this is a mature tech that will keep on being invested in by Facebook, and it is cost-effective, too,” he says. “But that engagement plan is still a must. We ran a teaser campaign for 1610 so staff knew what was coming, and we helped to ensure there were champions and influencers at every site, to help to get Workplace ingrained. It’s paying off so far, but you need to keep at it with continual engagement and monitoring of progress.”

**RBS gains from early adoption**

A mature and broader story about a corporate using enterprise social networks to good effect comes from the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS). It is four years
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now since the banking group adopted Workplace by Facebook, driven by an aspiration to foster a more collaborative culture and more engaged workers.

Craig Hoey, chief workplace officer at RBS, says the underlying point in adopting the platform was to measurably accelerate performance. “Every business naturally wants to build a more open culture, and we had been trying various platforms with that aim and only partial success in the lead-up to launching Workplace by Facebook,” says Hoey.

“We were an early adopter and part of the attraction was how we could engage with Facebook and help to shape the product’s development in what was initially its pilot phase.”

This agility was crucial, and in part was made possible by RBS being a large enough organisation to partner with Facebook on these terms, says Hoey. “The programme was rolled out in an iterative way,” he adds. “One key to getting it established and productive was having internal champions in the organisation, and, connected to this, letting the staff set the agenda and work out how to use it to best effect.”

Now, four years in, about 30,000 RBS employees are set up to use the platform and 84% of the workforce use it weekly, which is a top-line measure of its impact, says Hoey.
“More fundamentally, it means we can innovate and crowdsource on a day-to-day basis. It has changed our working practices in terms of troubleshooting, customer engagement and more. Anything that was lost in processes previously is now more likely to work.”

Hoey admits that meaningful measurement of this impact in quantitative terms is sometimes hard to establish, but that is not the same as saying there is no broad and clear benefit.

“Having a digital collaborative culture has brought the leadership and the rest of the business much closer together,” he says. “Staff have a much clearer sense of the business mission and are far more likely to be advocates for RBS as a result.”

So precisely how did RBS get the programme on track? “Progress is not always smooth on a programme like this,” says Hoey. “You have to test and learn, but we came at things with an openness to our staff taking the lead. There was an education piece up front, too, for individuals to understand that this was a core work platform we were driving for and not a social add-on. It has been a journey, but we always knew it would be.”

**Ask Archie chatbot chips in**

Interoperability is also part of the picture here. In four years, functionality on the platform, and the availability of new tools, is inevitable. What change has that
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ushered in? “We have our Ask Archie artificial intelligence (AI)-driven chatbot plugged into Workplace now, as one example of evolution,” says Hoey. “That started as an IT and HR [human resources] tool, but now covers property and other areas of the business, too.

“Added to this, just the way that mobility has taken hold is also a big shift. The platform has gone a long way to enabling and establishing more flexible working practices and that brings a real benefit. It’s not just about moving process online, but engaging in new and often simpler and more human ways. People feel more connected than previously, even if they are often more remote from one another physically.”

There is also a strong customer benefit that flows from collaboration among staff, says Hoey – if the bank receives a customer query for which the answer is not immediately obvious, the platform will source answers quickly.

“Staff understand how easily they can connect with the right people across the organisation now, and that’s a real game-changer,” he says. “That sense of separation and silos that affects many large organisations is now gone.”

Gartner’s Roth believes that enterprise collaboration technologies have the potential to transform how employees work by eliminating barriers to collaboration, improving engagement, and accelerating the flow of information and ideas.
But, out in the real world, the devil is often in the detail. At 1610, Workplace by Facebook did not replace the organisation’s existing systems. And as RBS’s Hoey found out, progress on an effective collaboration system can be slow.
The changing world of unified communications

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