

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to UCaaS

INTRODUCTION

In 1849, French writer Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr penned “plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose” — the more things change, the more they stay the same. The phrase suggests that certain fundamental characteristics or patterns persist despite noticeable transformations.

The common narrative that UCaaS is the future of enterprise communications is false. We are 20 years into the supposedly inevitable migration, and it has become clear that premises-based and private cloud communication systems remain viable for various reasons.

Many organizations hastily adopted cloud-based communications solutions to address pressing needs in response to the pandemic’s remote work requirements. The rushed migration to cloud-delivered services came at the expense of versatility. Many organizations realized that they had sacrificed important aspects of their communication infrastructure, such as control, customization, and security, to accommodate a specific and relatively simple use case.

As companies seek to remedy their rushed cloud implementations, they are finding that hybrid UC solutions have emerged as a viable alternative. Hybrid UC solutions leverage the power and simplicity of the cloud without compromising control and flexibility.



UC, UCAAS, AND HYBRID UC

Over the past 20 years, there has been a clear trend in information technology from what’s commonly referred to as premises-based solutions to cloud-delivered services. The trend spanned all of IT, but it was especially true for enterprise communications (UC), or more specifically, UC to Unified Communications as a Service (UCaaS). The pandemic further accelerated the migration.

The draw to cloud-delivered services was reasonable, but we failed to update the menu. Like most debates between two alternatives, the correct answer tends to involve a bit of both. In the case of communications, this is becoming known as hybrid UC solutions.

Enterprise communications were relatively stable for 50 years before the turn of the millennium. Changes started accelerating when telephony moved to Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). VoIP seemed innocent enough. The underlying tech was different, but VoIP phones looked and operated like their predecessors. To most users, it was a cable change (from telephone cords to network cables). Instead of connecting to a specialized communications computer known as a PBX, these phones connected to general computers running communications software.

Soon after that, the phones themselves began to disappear, replaced by phone apps on the PC. Then the new servers disappeared and were replaced with hosted services.

Communications went from hardware to software to services. Enterprise comms had new underlying tech and business models. Additionally, VoIP enabled additional modalities. Telephony transitioned to Unified Communications (UC), which included messaging and meeting services. The whole stack was swept into the cloud-migration frenzy.



Voice, messaging, and meetings are different and separate workloads. While meeting and messaging services work better as cloud-delivered services, this is not always the case for voice. UCaaS became the future, at least compared to the available traditional PBX solutions.

The “PBX is dead” myth took hold and spread quickly, yet there were clues that we had missed something.

First, UC was still young and evolving. Second, many organizations, particularly larger ones, were not embracing UCaaS. It is clear now that premises-based and private cloud solutions will remain dominant in the foreseeable future.

To be fair, the cloud did have some compelling benefits over premises-based solutions, at least temporarily. For example, “the cloud” offered “opex” models while the traditional PBX was sold under a “capex” model. Most CFOs prefer opex: advantage UCaaS. However, premises-based and private cloud solutions today can be acquired on opex or capex models. The customer has a choice: advantage UC.

Another characteristic that favored UCaaS was the promise of “evergreen software” — a clever term to signify ongoing upgrades. There’s no difference in upgradability between UC and UCaaS. What evergreen software came to represent was that the onus to upgrade fell on the provider rather than the customer.

For IT teams, upgrades can be expensive, unplanned, and risky.

While that sounded attractive, it also goes against operational logic. Many organizations avoid software updates during peak periods — and peak periods vary. For example, retailers avoid the fourth quarter, and most schools avoid changes in the fall. Outsourcing means upgrades will occur at inopportune times. Conversely, managed services provide enterprises with seamless upgrades and control over scheduling.

Another consideration is cost. UCaaS models, priced per user per month, seemed inexpensive. However, the total costs were often higher than traditional models, particularly with larger implementations. This is the case with most price-per-user models. As a simple example, a train or subway ticket is attractive for one, but a taxi or car is better for a group.

The total price is why so many firms are moving back from the public cloud to their own data centers. The trend is so clear that there’s a term for it. Cloud repatriation describes moving apps, services, and data off public cloud services such as UCaaS and back to data centers, on-premises, private cloud, or hybrid setups.

Ten years ago, it was legacy PBX/UC vs. UCaaS, and there wasn’t much argument. Today, the menu is legacy PBX/UC, UCaaS, or hybrid UC. All three are viable, but each has different strengths. UCaaS fits small businesses nicely, and hybrid UC solutions are more suitable for larger organizations and/or firms with specialized control, resilience, security, or flexibility requirements.

WHY HYBRID UC

Premises-based systems were initially located on-premises, while UCaaS was initially a multitenant service delivered from the cloud. However, it’s not that simple anymore — both have evolved. “Premises-based solutions” are now implemented on-site, in private data centers, and in hypervisor cloud services. It is not uncommon for UCaaS to be implemented in a private, single-tenant dedicated instance model.



The distinctions between UC and UCaaS are fading. They have far more similarities than differences. The key difference between UC and UCaaS is that the latter is a public, multi-tenant service. Enterprises and organizations that require a shared deployment need to select UCaaS. Some customers have required their UCaaS provider to create a dedicated instance.

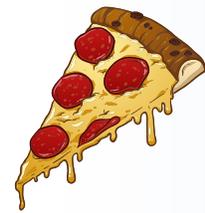
The notion of forcing the decision between UC and UCaaS is also disappearing, as hybrid UC offers the most flexibility. Frost & Sullivan forecasted that hybrid deployments will dominate the UC market — 79% by 2027. “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.” The goal remains communications and collaboration, and deployment is an implementation concern.



THE EVOLUTION AT MITEL

UC, UCaaS, and hybrid UC technologies have evolved as described above. Where the focus has been on deployment models, the priority today is on flexibility. Businesses demand (and deserve) flexibility in enterprise communications. This includes:

- Deployment flexibility across solutions (communications and collaboration, verticals, and customer experience) and models (premises-based, private cloud, and public cloud)
- The ability to separate workloads/modalities as necessary



Pizza is an emotionally dangerous subject, but it provides an interesting metaphor for UCaaS. In the 1930s, a new pizza oven enabled the explosion of a NY delicacy: the pizza slice. Instead of ordering a whole pie, customers could now buy pizza by the slice.

Pizza slice shops opened all around New York. Almost every legendary pizza slice shop in NY opened in the golden era of the pizza slice, the 1960s–1970s. To the casual observer, pizza by the slice is just a clever way of selling the same pizza, but it’s not. Pizza-by-the-slice pizzas are baked at lower temperatures, which reduces the risk of hand-burning and dries out the pizza more. This allows them to sit longer on display and better accommodates reheating. For a brief time, whole pies faded in popularity, but they soon regained their edge.

UCaaS is conceptually similar to pizza by the slice. Both are sold per unit and as a service. They are both optimized for different consumption models. Both were exaggerated as the inevitable future. Pizza-by-the-slice is a form of pizza, just as UCaaS is a form of UC. The key is not to overlook the enduring value and advantages of on-premises and hybrid UC solutions.

- Capacity to retain and increase control (and flexibility) over the solution to ensure security and ability to accommodate future requirements
- Flexibility to deliver communications to all employees regardless of role or location

Mitel recognizes the compelling value that hybrid UC solutions offer to a broad spectrum of businesses, particularly in sectors with specific needs such as government, financial services, healthcare, and education. In these industries, the ability to maintain control over sensitive data while leveraging the scalability and cost-effectiveness of cloud resources is paramount.



To help navigate these needs, Mitel announced its common communications framework, which is its secret sauce, whether you're in the cloud, on-prem, in between, or both. It's the thread that pulls the solution together for customers. It is flexible, secure, and scalable, so businesses can stop cobbling together their UC systems and find the solution that meets their requirements.

Mitel's new Secure Cloud facilitates midmarket and large enterprise deployments for communication, collaboration, and customer experience solutions. The cloud service also provides applications and vertical solutions for alarming, broadcast messaging, critical event management, telecare, and AI-infused customer experience. And the Secure Cloud offers hundreds of integrations with leading partners to customize implementations and managed services.

Among those integrations is with Zoom. This alliance allows Zoom Workplace to seamlessly integrate with Mitel UC solutions. It brings the entire Zoom Workplace suite to Mitel customers, including Zoom Team Chat, Zoom Meetings, and Zoom AI Companion.

Hybrid UC is Mitel's strategic differentiation and the cornerstone of its go-to-market worldwide strategy. The approach combines Mitel's understanding of the diverse needs of modern businesses with its commitment to providing flexible solutions. This strategy is central to Mitel's engagement with partners and customers, positioning the company as a provider of comprehensive, tailored solutions that address the evolving demands of today's dynamic business landscape.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Modern enterprise communication is unlike anything we have seen before. The modalities have increased, the business models have changed, and the attitudes toward when, where, and how we communicate have changed. Yet telephony remains relatively consistent.

There is still tremendous value in telephony and in retaining control over it. It remains critical and effective. It has to be protected from a variety of vulnerabilities, from hackers to outages. Hybrid UC provides a high degree of control, customization, reliability, and security, making it well-suited for businesses with stringent requirements or those operating in regulated industries. Hybrid UC offers flexibility and adaptability to accommodate immediate needs and unexpected new requirements.

Hybrid UC also enables organizations to strike the right balance between on-premises and cloud deployments, ensuring compliance with stringent regulations and data security requirements. This win-win approach empowers businesses to optimize their IT infrastructure, reduce operational costs, and enhance their ability to adapt to evolving market demands.

Enterprises increasingly turn to hybrid models that combine the best of both worlds. With this approach, organizations can tailor their communication infrastructure to their specific needs, leveraging the flexibility and scalability of UCaaS while maintaining control over critical systems and data.



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