**Microsoft: It is all about the experience**

Part 5 – The limitless work environment

**“Unified communications, like other ways of working, will not become a success if people using it aren’t wowed by their experience. Once you start using visual communications and sharing not only your documents and screens, but also your facial expressions and other subtle cues - a whole new world of communications opens up,” says Emelie Ekblad at Microsoft.**

Science fiction writers had it all figured out back in the early 20th century. Staring the other party, alien or not, straight in the eyes while communicating was definitely going to be the default mode of communication rather than holding up a handset to your ear. Some 50-60 years later, much has changed but we still do mainly voice-only communication. Then again, cars aren’t really flying yet, either.

“I believe the vision has always been there. But as with the flying cars perhaps, the technology issues have been more challenging than we could have imagined. The result has been solutions that range from cheap or free unreliable tools which might have scared people off rather than turn them into true believers, to slick room based solutions requiring obscene budgets,” says Emelie Ekblad, head of Microsoft Enterprise Social in Sweden and product manager for Lync, SharePoint and Yammer.

**Early adopters in the Nordics**

According to Emelie Ekblad, organizations in the Nordics seem keener on implementing unified communications than in the rest of the world. Exactly why this is, Emelie Ekblad isn’t sure. But a contributing factor is most certainly that video communications have become a commodity and that people are getting used to the idea of using it both at work and when chatting to their friends and family on their smartphones.

“The demand in the Nordics is huge. Once people see how they can have their usual office applications, email, chat, document sharing and face-to-face communication seamlessly integrated in one interface, they go wild.”

Even though the media doesn’t write much about unified communications, at least not in Sweden where Emelie Ekblad is based, Microsoft’s Lync and video forums on social platforms attract many times the interest and number of followers compared to other areas. The demand is definitely there.

**Integration – obstacle and opportunity**

“Integration is the key to persuasive unified communications, and also the main obstacle holding the development back. Not only do we in the software industry have to make sure that many different applications can communicate freely with each other, we also have to take a number of different technologies and protocols into account when building a complete unified communications solution like Lync.”

So, apart from having the challenge of integrating different software applications and platforms, there is the issue of the infrastructure to deal with. According to Emelie, the vision of having an integrated unified communications environment just on your desktop at the office was good enough a decade ago.

“Today, many companies have rolled out integrated video and document sharing over multiple platforms and infrastructures. They expect this to function flawlessly on laptops, tablets, mobiles – in the office environment, at home or on the move and we are just getting there.”

**The meeting as the starting point**

“When we started defining our vision for unified communications, we looked at a number of scenarios for meetings and communication, and focused on the meeting experience itself. How do people meet, what does a productive meeting look like, what are the obstacles? Then we started looking at what we had in our portfolio, and what we had to develop to create the most productive experience possible.”

In the Microsoft vision, video communications flow freely between terminals and platforms. Starting a video meeting in the office, seamlessly moving it to the mobile phone of tablet for leaving the office and then swapping it to the Xbox home entertainment system at home should be fully possible.

“People graduating today have also come to expect a very different IT platform from what organizations could provide only a few years back. Much of the education at universities has a strong element of collaboration using different platforms, but also video conferencing both in projects and lectures have made video a natural part of how they have come to expect to work.”

**What’s next?**

Currently, more than 90 percent of those trying a Lync environment want to continue. According to Emelie Ekblad, Microsoft’s challenge has been mainly in the integration of platforms and terminals, and in the management of the solutions - from room-based telepresence solutions to the smartphones.

But the next step is to go from *unified* to *universal* communications. Her vision is that in the near future, no one will think twice about linking up to someone working from home, Skyping over their tablet or home entertainment system in the living room.

“For decades, our industry has talked about the benefits of visual communications in terms of increased productivity and cost-savings. But very little has been said about the next revolution – using these tools for improving sales and service delivery to our customers. This way of using integrated unified communications is about to redefine how companies and organizations relate to their customer and grow their business,” says Emelie Ekblad.