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## How to deploy unified communications -- without tears

It's easy to make mistakes deploying unified communications systems. Here are the lessons learned by four IT managers.

 By **John Edwards**

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Computerworld - It sounds so easy: Just give employees the ability to easily move among desktop and mobile voice calls, instant messaging and videoconferencing technologies -- and productivity and efficiency improvements will naturally follow.

But IT managers such as Sonny Reid have learned that [deploying unified communications](#) (UC) systems isn't that simple. "We clearly had challenges with bringing everybody onto the same platform," says Reid, global network director at [Legrand North America](#), a building automation firm in West Hartford, Conn.

A UC system integrates multiple technologies so that workers can, for example, reply to e-mail with a voice message, read voice-mail messages as e-mail, turn instant messages into telephone calls and answer their desk phones from the airport. The challenge is [deploying a UC system](#) without causing chaos as the organization adopts unfamiliar technologies.

Elizabeth Herrell, an analyst at Forrester Research Inc., says the problem areas include system interoperability, infrastructure readiness and user training. Failing to fully address each of these points, she notes, could lead to crippling enterprise communications failures.

"UC adoption is not a single solution but a process," Herrell warns. "Without a clear understanding of how UC benefits the entire user community, many of its benefits may not be achieved."

Jayanth Angl, an analyst at Info-Tech Research Group in London, Ontario, says there are several infrastructure issues that could derail a UC deployment, such as implementing it over a network that's incapable of supporting the new traffic. That's why UC projects require a lot of careful planning and testing.

Reid says he was able to achieve a successful UC deployment -- with only a few hiccups -- mostly because of attention to details, such as helping end users learn how to access and use the system's various

### Six steps to UC success

- 1. Create a project strategy.** Any organization adopting unified communications without a detailed deployment plan is just begging for a communications fiasco.
- 2. Check for interoperability and infrastructure readiness.** Make certain that the existing enterprise network, including servers, routers and other infrastructure elements, are ready to handle the additional load UC technology will create. In a mixed environment, work with all vendors to ensure that the UC system's components mesh seamlessly. Test the system

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communication modes. "There were no showstoppers, which was basically due to the significant planning we did upfront," he says.

A phased deployment, rolling out a UC system in several limited stages, also helped Reid avoid any major surprises. He decided early on that Legrand would deploy its Cisco Systems Inc. UC technology on a site-by-site basis at its office locations worldwide. The lessons learned along the way in terms of system performance and user training are continuing to pay dividends as additional locations are given UC capabilities. "We've basically taken advantage of our learning and developed a best-practices cheat sheet," Reid says.

Joseph T. Massey Jr., technical adviser to the deputy CIO at Atlanta's Emory University, says that when it comes to a successful rollout, there's no substitute for knowledge -- both of system operations and end-user needs. Emory's UC deployment, based on Avaya Inc. technology, includes a complex mix of fixed and mobile [VoIP](#), [unified messaging](#), conferencing and other communications technologies.

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thoroughly at each deployment stage.

**3. Provide user training and support.** Many end users find UC technology confusing and intimidating. Provide initial training and ongoing support to help employees learn how to use UC and exploit its full potential.

**4. Use existing communications resources.** Whenever possible, bring existing technologies -- such as PBXs and phones -- under the UC umbrella. This approach will minimize deployment disruptions, since some of the system will already be in place, and will lessen the likelihood of unexpected failures. It will also speed employee training and save money.

**5. Stay within your comfort zone.** If a particular UC system is based on underlying software that your staff isn't familiar with, you may want to look for another product.

**6. Stage a phased deployment.** A gradual rollout, such as by department or floor, will limit any start-up glitches to just a handful of employees rather than the entire enterprise.

— John Edwards

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