



Microsoft Partners See Coming Unified Communications Talent Crunch

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There's a hurricane approaching for Microsoft's channel partners. But instead of taping up windows and boarding up doorways, the best way VARs can prepare for this storm is to start building in-house expertise in unified communications and seeking out new types of partners to help deliver solutions.

That's the opinion of a growing number of Microsoft partners in the unified communications space who are gearing up for what they believe [will be a flood of interest in the technology](#), which combines instant messaging, voice and videoconferencing to improve business collaboration.

But while unified communications does require certain skills that fall outside the purview of traditional integrators, many VARs are filling the gap with carefully calculated partnerships and by [investing in targeted training of their own staff](#).

For Microsoft partners, unified communications creates the potential to partner with [non-traditional Microsoft partners](#), says Jay Lendl, vice president of Microsoft services at Granite Pointe Partners, a solution provider in Plymouth, Minn.

Non-traditional partners often have backgrounds in generic telephony solutions or competitive solutions from Cisco or Avaya, and they're also experienced with soft phone functionality and PBXs. This skill set complements Granite Pointe Partners' own in-house expertise and opens the door to a wider market opportunity, Lendl said.

"There are certainly opportunities to partner -- and partner differently -- than we have in the past," said Lendl.

In return, Microsoft partners can help non-Microsoft partners figure out how to work with the software giant more effectively, and share their expertise in [Active Directory](#) and other core technologies, Lendl said.

Trever Renquist, vice president of sales and marketing at Gold Systems, a Boulder, Co.-based Microsoft partner, agrees with the effectiveness of this approach.

"We've been working with partners extensively in areas in which we don't have skill sets. As a result, we've been able to go after accounts and solve business problems that we weren't able to previously, which has been a big positive for us," Renquist said.

Solution providers with backgrounds in telephony integration and data convergence are best equipped to capitalize on the coming wave of unified communications demand, said Amir Sohrobi, executive vice president of MSPX, an Arlington, Va.-based VoIP specialist.

But for VARs to succeed, they're going to have to invest in training the right people in their organizations, or bring in voice application and protocol experience from outside. The former approach makes more sense, Sohrabi said.

"In the long term, it's best for solution providers to develop the skill set in-house. There is going to be so much demand for unified communications, and not enough experienced partners out there to handle it," said Sohrabi.

Some solution providers believe the talent crunch brought on by burgeoning demand for unified communications is about to become a major issue. While the channel had sufficient capacity in 2007 to meet demand for unified communications, VARs have differing opinions of whether the same will hold true in 2008.

Not only will the sheer volume of demand for unified communications rise next year, so too will the complexity of deployments, noted Lendl. "I think [the channel is] understaffed a bit. And that provides an opportunity for people who can go out and create vision for unified communications and help organizations get their arms around it," he said.

The challenge for some solution providers who are getting their feet wet in unified communications will be to realize that clients don't give second chances when it comes to technical glitches in their VoIP systems.

"With unified communications, once voice gets involved, the tolerance for downtime becomes very minimal," said Sohrabi. "Most of all, you need to make sure you have people that understand the concept of mission critical applications."