

# Broadsoft or Skype for Business?

## The New UC: Why Broadsoft and Microsoft Are Not Competitors ... Today.

*2015 Opinion of Clark Atwood, President, Concierge Core Services LLC*

Because of our company's history of success with Hosted VoIP sales, I am often asked about Microsoft Skype for Business (formerly known as Lync) and if I think Microsoft is a formidable competitor to Broadsoft in the Cloud Communications space. My answer has been "Not today." Here are the reasons why.

### **Broadsoft Hosted VoIP**

We used Broadsoft successfully for many years in our company. We had very few, if any, consequential complaints. It is a solid platform and, in the right hands, an excellent tool for businesses small and large.

Broadsoft is a leading, carrier-class, multi-tenant communications platform. It is widely used globally by many flavors of communication companies. Some sell services using the full suite of Broadsoft tools, including third-party connectivity options, while others use subsets of the product to facilitate specific communication needs. It is hard to argue with Broadsoft's global success and stability.

Let me share with you how most of our Broadsoft-related sales progress. It goes something like this:

- Client wants to change their phone system
- Sales representative develops an understanding of the phone system requirements
- Sales representative meets the requirements and offers additional value proposition of Broadsoft features, redundancy options, third-party integration and support from the Hosted VoIP provider
- Customer signs – BUT asks for the initial rollout to mimic their existing phone system in order to minimize change to the employees. Broadsoft is so feature rich, this is possible in most cases. Additional features are slowly added into the organization as the sales rep reminds the client or the hosted provider offers features.



This is a simplified representation of the sale as there are many more aspects, technical details and potential competitive advantages that may be part of the sale process. My purpose is to point out some of the stark differences between Broadsoft and Skype for Business sales cycle and adoption reasons.

Broadsoft has a compelling Unified Communications (UC) strategy. Broadsoft has a suite of features and functionality and also has a healthy development community that utilizes its Application Programming Interface (API) that is used to enhance UC capabilities with third-party connections. It is a robust solution with a combined best-of-breed approach that works very well.

## Success with Broadsoft

Successful deployments with Broadsoft may include:

- Broadsoft approved phones. In the past we have been partial to Polycom, but more manufactures are now working with Broadsoft. The VoIP provider typically dictates what works and what doesn't when it comes to equipment. Moreover, it is best to find out what makes and models they will support. Just because it can connect Broadsoft, does not mean the provider is prepared to support it.
- Broadsoft can be deployed in both a public Internet connectivity and a private connectivity (MPLS, private line) model.
- Multi-location companies typically favor routing voice over private connection with Class of Service (CoS) and Quality of Service (QoS).
- We lead with a design for automatic failover in the event of a circuit outage. Typically this is a failover from a private connection to a lower cost public connection. This also gives physical redundancy because they are typically two different types of connections from two different providers and may even have two different entrances into the building.
- Large organizations may consider hot sparing (local storage of replacement equipment) of critical equipment.
- Most companies start out with similar features and functionality as their old phone system, but a scheduled review of design and available features to address business needs is crucial to maximizing the value. We redesigned our voice communications from the ground up three times in eight years without having to change our provider and without additional cost.
- Training is the key to success; most VoIP providers offer ongoing free training. This is a valuable (and an under-utilized) tool. Take advantage of training options!



## Skype for Business

In late 2014, we had several prospective clients asking us about PSTN voice and Lync so we decided we needed to put Skype for Business through some paces. There was, at the time, a perception that the early Lync connectivity to the PSTN was a lot more difficult to do. This is to be expected with any new product or service.

Skype for Business is a product sold by Microsoft. Formerly called Lync, it's Instant Messaging (IM), screen sharing, voice communications, voice conferencing, video conferencing and presence has been making a positive mark on business. Often, Lync was deployed because it was bundled as part of a Microsoft Office 365 or Volume License Agreement purchase. (Brilliant move – Microsoft made its global mark in the 1990's knowing how to leverage the distribution channels.)

Skype, probably the world's most brand-recognizable voice and video communication service, was purchased in 2011 for \$8.5 billion dollars and Microsoft integrated Skype connectivity to Lync in late 2014. In early 2015, Microsoft renamed Lync to Skype for Business and did a major upgrade to the client software to showcase Skype's features and functionality, while maintaining the value of Lync.

Let me share with you what we have learned by using Skype for Business. The shocker is how it fundamentally changes and transforms how your employees communicate.

### Potential Mine Field

We had been using Lync for some time so we thought we were 'ready' to add PSTN voice to the mix. We had great equipment – Jabra headsets, Logitech HD cameras, as well as Polycom phones that were on the compatibility list. We dove in head first...and quickly realized there was a better way.

We love standards in our company. We standardize as much as we can including our computers, monitors (as possible) and printers. Our home-based users are standardized on their routers and we have done prioritize of voice communications on their broadband connections.

We found that many technical pieces of equipment will work well with Skype for Business, to a point. Once we deployed and used it as our primary means of communication, we started to have some technical glitches. We started noticing that our equipment was not always working well with Lync.



We dug deeper and we found two additional labels we should have understood better going into deployment that exists on some UC equipment:

- Lync compatible
- Lync optimized

After doing some research, we made (the very smart) decision, to refresh our gear to Lync Optimized equipment. This eliminated a ton of the little annoying technical compatibility problems we were seeing.

Here are some insights and innovation we now understand:

- The purpose of Skype for Business is NOT to make your communications work like your previous phone system.
- A commitment by the company, the provider, and the employees to change old habits and develop new ones is a
  - ◇ Throw away the play book on your old phone system. Start fresh. Start with what is available.
  - ◇ Multi-tenancy is not really clear with Skype for Business. There are providers using the platform to service multiple companies. You may however, give up some things like extensions, how you handle federation --typically set to open as a default and other features. Federation should be a separate discussion you have with your provider on how, where and who can federate with your employees.
  - ◇ You have to work closely with the provider to determine how you will handle PBX features from what features are available. Don't assume you can do something the same way you used to. Even if the system has a similar feature, there may be a license difference that makes it no longer practical to use or a there may be a better way to accomplish what you are trying to do.

- ◇ Schedule training time with your employees. Then schedule a follow up training. You have to remember this is not just their phone. It is their phone number, their Instant Messaging connection, their video conference bridge, their screen sharing tool and their presence status for all to see.

- Open federation was, and still is, an adjustment for us. Now we have to consider if we want our providers, vendors, and clients seeing our presence and reaching out to us via instant messaging and instant video conferencing.
- We started off strong on video then backed off a bit. I would start a meeting and say "OK, start your cameras." The next thing I knew, I was seeing four or five ceiling fans spinning. I guess that working-in my PJs thing had caught on a little more than I thought with the at-home folks.
- The big shock came when the employees decided they no longer needed a desk phone. We knew that we would have some attrition of handsets, but almost every employee decided that the new Jabra wireless headset was just easier. The bigger debate came with over-the-ear or over-the-head discussions. My strong suggestion: pick a head set that has both options.
- One thing that pushed employees to abandon their desk phone was that we had standardized previously on laptops. Since their communications goes with their computer, it was easy to undock and go and get used to using a headset, camera with microphone, or speakerphone for communications. Companies with desktop hardware or virtualized environments may need a lot more planning before abandoning a desk phone or using sim ring features.
- Dragging and dropping people into calls has become routine. More importantly, we have seen a concerted effort to communicate short messages via instant message and if the message starts to run long, it is just a single click to make that conversation into a voice or video call. New employees have started recording their calls with supervisors, so they can go back and listen to their "call notes".
- We CAN be on Office 365 and have a provider host our PSTN Skype for Business voice services. It takes some configuring, but we got there and have been pleased with the result.

## Success with Skype for Business

There truly are some great and powerful things with Skype for Business. My strong caution at this time is that if you are unwilling to innovate and transform how you communicate, you will probably struggle with Skype for Business. You need to (and eventually will) get used to the presence status showing up in other applications.

You should also have a quality technical team inside your company, or have a strong provider to help you. As with any solid computing environment, we can't stress enough the need for standards inside your business. You don't want to be chasing ghosts caused by uniqueness with individual users. Standardize everything you reasonably can.

The growth both in deployment and features is making it hard for Microsoft to focus on PSTN connectivity for Skype for Business. There are Microsoft Partners that have stepped up, and are consulting on, VoIP readiness assessments, managing the PSTN voice connectivity and supporting both Office 365 and on-premises customers.

Schedule time with any prospective provider to review features and configurations prior to making a decision. Ask questions. Think out of the box. Come up with a game plan and then schedule a review for a week or two AFTER implementation. Gauge your employees' responses. Schedule more training if needed. Find out what is working well and what may not be meeting expectations. Reconfigure items if needed.

## Broadsoft and Microsoft Are Not True Competitors Today

Today, as hosted voice is now mainstream, the prospecting pond is plenty big enough for both companies. Their target clients are different in several ways. The system requirements and third-party connectivity are different. The costs may be closer than some think, but it all depends on what features are used and how. Configuration options are different. Both platforms are solid (in the right hands) and both work. Only the future will determine if and when they will compete head-to-head.

There ARE hybrid models that I have seen for both Broadsoft and Microsoft Skype for Business. A hybrid model is typically deployed as a temporary solution such as waiting for service contract to expire or some technical challenge that is not yet able to be replicated in the new environment. If a hybrid model is proposed, it is best to clearly understand the depth of responsibility for all parties involved so that you can avoid a finger pointing issue when something does not work right.

Determining what is right for your business is what really matters. Meeting a specific business objective is the key. Enhanced productivity is an often an over-used reason for technology, but with some study and effort, I think you will find that there are legitimate business reasons why either platform may make business sense and the value they bring to meeting your business objectives. We have benefited greatly from both of these platforms and proud to represent both.



## About the Author

Clark Atwood is passionate about finding the right technology to meet a specific business need. Sometimes he just has to get ideas out of his head because he thinks it might help someone to gain knowledge, or make an informed decision. Sometimes he is right; his company started selling hosted VoIP back in 2003. Other times he asks, "Where is my flying car? I was promised flying cars by now." Today he is leading a company that has that same passion he has for helping business. Concierge Core Services LLC ([www.conciergecs.com](http://www.conciergecs.com)) is a communications and technology Master Broker, offering independent brokers access to proven and disruptive technologies through the representation of dozens of providers to meet business technology needs.

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