We need only to look around us, or probably just at the small rectangular object in our hand, for evidence of technology’s continuing advance. Each year brings breakthroughs, evolutions and benchmarks in equipping organizations and individuals through technology. Who among us at the start of 2013, for example, had a notion of Google Glass?

These new developments have implications for IT departments and the broader enterprise in terms of services the IT department provides and how those services are acquired and deployed. Heading into 2014, Avaya has for the fifth time turned to its cadre of leading thinkers for observations on the year ahead in information and communications technology. Here are Seven Communications Trends for 2014, accompanied by a brief introduction to this year’s resident prognosticators:

The trends:

#1: Businesses extend deeper into the cloud. Most early cloud initiatives were tactical, focused on vetting vendor capabilities and testing discrete, non-core processes in the cloud. Now as more businesses make capital expense (Capex) vs. operating expense (Opex) spending decisions (see trend #2), organizations that choose the cloud option, whether through a private, public or hybrid model, will see a shift in how their IT organizations operate. IT functions will focus less on delivery and support of technology and instead spend more time as technology advisers and enablers. Making this shift, IT functions will turn their attention more to helping internal customers meet their business requirements, not just keep the servers running (see trend #3).

#2: Purse strings could be loosening. Signs of invigorated business spending in 2014 are evident in double-digit Capex growth predictions by leading global asset managers. However, many organizations face tough rent vs. own decisions when it comes to IT, especially companies that have underspent on technology and communications since the recession and desperately need to catch up. For some organizations, deciding whether to build and own IT solutions themselves
or migrate to Opex solutions from service providers, often involving cloud options, could prove perplexing.

**#3: Another major shift in IT focus — from products and services to outcomes.**
As the transition to the cloud continues, another trend is emerging — the expectation among internal customers for IT to deliver outcomes rather than products and services. For example, instead of being asked to deploy an interactive voice response system, IT’s charge might be to help increase call containment rates or reduce agent expense across call centers. This shift in emphasis will create new demands on both IT organizations in terms of business knowledge and consulting skills, as well as the service providers they rely on.

**#4: Crowd-sourcing emerges in the support services setting.** Businesses are discovering that customers are demanding a more robust support experience in general, and not just function — or product-specific — support. Going forward, companies that provide a community structure in which customers and company employees, especially subject matter experts, can more easily commingle will have a unique opportunity to create a more fulfilling support experience. Using group problem-solving and reward tools like gamification, as well as sophisticated performance tracking and analytics tools, forward-looking companies will supercharge these highly interactive support environments.

**#5: The midmarket will expect different treatment.** New technologies, the cloud an exemplary example, are powerful drivers of middle market empowerment. Midmarket leaders are no longer satisfied with solutions that are scaled-down versions of larger systems. Instead, they want solutions designed to meet their specific business needs, as well as the ability of their IT people to manage them. Support excellence will increasingly mean providing the right information in a tempo and volume that a smaller operation can handle, along with the tools needed to put that information to use.

**#6: Multimodal communications support reaches a tipping point.** Businesses everywhere are experimenting with different communications modes for customer support. Avaya Global Support Services, for example, has significantly shortened issue resolution times by escalating up and down in various modes — voice alone is often inadequate; voice-plus-web is only marginally better; so voice-plus-web-plus-chat-plus-video can put customers and support resources on the same page. However, businesses deploying multiple modes will need to monitor and measure customer experience to determine when switching across modes becomes frustrating for customers — recent research indicates customer effort is becoming as important as customer satisfaction. With this realization,
companies will seek help to orchestrate their different modes and to coordinate contextual information and analytics capabilities so they can monitor and measure customer effort.

#7: The people you need when you need them. Vendors are continuously creating new applications, some of which are transforming how organizations deploy and capitalize on technology. While this innovation can help boost business growth and improve efficiency, new solutions can further burden IT organizations that are already being compelled to handle growing service demand with shrinking staff resources. New applications and business consulting demands (see trend #3) may also require skill sets beyond those of existing staff. This imbalance between requirements and resources could prompt organizations to explore staff augmentation options beyond the typical “manage my switch” arrangements. Businesses may temporarily bring in people with the right skill sets to enable new technologies and help improve internal capabilities. They will also seek technology management tools that smoothly integrate into their existing operations.

The trend spotters:

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