eGuide:

Comparing UC Vendors

6 Key Considerations

YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO PICK THE WRONG UC VENDOR

Changing your company's business communications solution is an investment in time and money that will touch everyone in your organization. A successful unified communications (UC) deployment should streamline everyone's work flow, simplify IT operations and deliver a lowered total cost of operations. Your company deserves nothing less.

Today there are more business communications providers than ever before. Which vendor is the best fit for your organization?

This eGuide will help you compare UC providers so you can make the right decision. It presents six key considerations that will help you thoroughly understand each vendor's service offerings and core expertise. Armed with this knowledge, you can be confident that you're investing your company's communications resources wisely.

6 Key Considerations

Buying a unified communications service is more than picking out a dial plan and features. Your business communications solution is one of the most mission-critical tools your company depends on to conduct its business.

1. Solution Architecture
2. Apps & Features
3. End User Experience
4. Implementation & Support
5. UC Value Proposition
6. Vendor as a Business Partner

There's a handy checklist of performance criteria and a table for recording your impressions of three different vendors. This bit of homework will pay off when you choose the right UC vendor for your business.

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1 | Solution Architecture

More and more companies are turning to cloud service providers for their unified communications needs. It just makes sense. The right cloud UC solution is hassle-free, offers great features and scales on-demand.

But cloud deployments aren't right for every organization. Some companies need to control data locally, others prefer to acquire their system as a capital expense while others aren't ready to commit to an all-cloud solution.

Is a cloud or onsite UC solution best for your business? The right vendor will have expertise in both, and also will have the ability to deploy a hybrid solution if combining features makes the most sense for your particular situation.

The RIGHT Vendor Will Answer YES:

	V1	V2	V3
Do you offer cloud, onsite and hybrid UC solution deployments?			
Are your cloud, onsite and hybrid deployments built on a single codebase for complete and seamless interoperability?			
Are your phones, codebase and applications developed in-house? (Note: Solutions that depend on third-party integrations for key components can be less stable particularly during upgrades.)			
In the event of equipment or network failure, does your solution launch automatic failover without service interruption?			
Does your CLOUD solution offer enterprise-grade, end-to-end security for voice?			
Does your CLOUD solution offer both public and private network options?			
Does your ONSITE solution offer distributed system intelligence? (Note: Distributed systems provide higher system redundancy at less expense than centralized system intelligence.)			
Does your HYBRID solution offer an identical experience for both cloud and onsite users? (Note: Demands on IT increase dramatically with deployments of mixed vendor solutions.)			
Does your HYBRID solution unify separate cloud and onsite locations into a single, company-wide directory with full extension dialing, even internationally?			

2 | Apps & Features

A VoIP business communications solution should provide enterprise-grade call quality and stability and include robust call control features as table stakes. This level of performance cannot be taken for granted, especially when considering pure-play cloud providers that have limited pedigree as phone service providers.

While many vendors profess to offer unified communications applications, pay close attention to how unified messaging, chat services and online meetings are provisioned. Many cloud providers offer only VoIP and cobble together a patchwork of partner products to deliver the collaborative communications applications that are essential to the way business is conducted today. Keep in mind that working with multiple UC apps creates unnecessary complexity and expense for IT and end users alike.

The RIGHT Vendor Will Answer YES:	V1	V2	V3
Does your company have a long history of VoIP telephony systems development, including patented technologies?			
Does your UC solution include chat, voice messaging, video, softphone, desktop sharing, file sharing, online meetings, email and calendar integration?			
Does your company provide an end-to-end solution including endpoints (IP phones)?			
Do these apps offer open source APIs to allow for integration and customization with CRM, ERP and other business processes apps?			
Does your solution support Bring Your Own Device mobility deployment on popular smartphones, tablets and wearables?			
Does your solution offer desktop and mobile "one click" joining of conferences and online meetings, eliminating meeting passcodes and PINs?			
Does you solution include fully-integrated, inbound and outbound contact center solutions for call queues, IVR scripts and customer chat, email and voice?			

3 | End User Experience

For many companies, the move from basic telephony to unified communications ushers in an entirely new way of using technology to streamline business processes. Too often, trying to learn complicated bells and whistles or poorly integrated features can overwhelm new users. The result can be low adoption rates and a failed UC implementation.

Don't let unnecessary complexity ruin your company's opportunity to take advantage of modern unified communications solutions. Do your comparative homework when reviewing your UC vendor options and give strong consideration to the end-user experience. Your employees (and IT helpdesk) will thank you for a great implementation experience.

The RIGHT Vendor Will Answer YES:	V1	V2	V3
Can users access all your UC applications from a single user interface with a single login?			
Is your user interface modern and intuitive so users can start communicating with little-to-no training?			
Does your solution offer easy-to-use wizards for configuring call handling for a variety of personalized user states?			
Does your solution automatically schedule and send meeting invitations and reminders with Outlook and other ICS apps?			
Can users escalate a conversation from chat, to call, to audio conferencing, to desktop sharing to online meetings by clicking simple icons within a single interface?			
Does your solution provide a web-based interface so customers, partners and other non-networked contacts can fully participate in screen-sharing and chat in online meetings?			
For a CLOUD deployment, do you offer a "help" button on users' phones so they can call your customer service with questions?			
For an ONSITE deployment, can your IT department be trained in system management and support in hours versus days?			

4 | Implementation & Support

Unless all your company needs is a few phones and dial tone, there's more to deploying a business communications system than opening a box and hooking up some handsets. When call quality is mission-critical, there's a right way and a not-so-right way to deploy a VoIP communications solution.

Researching your vendor's technical strength is paramount. How deep is their bench? Many cloud communications vendors cannot offer full network and professional services to support your deployment success. Vendors with extensive partner ecosystems can provide local technical expertise when you need it most. Your best choice is a provider that can support your technical needs before, during and after your solution is deployed.

The RIGHT Vendor Will Answer YES:	V1	V2	V3
Do you have an extensive, worldwide network of partners, consultants and system integrators to support my deployment?			
Do you offer system design, network design validation, and WLAN and VoIP readiness assessment services?			
Do you offer ongoing network optimization and health checks?			
Do you have engineers on staff who can escalate my need to the developer level if needed to resolve an issue?			
Can cutover to your solution happen in a matter of hours, providing little-to-no disruption of my operations and workflows?			
Do you have in-house network and professional services teams to customize your solution if I have a special requirement?			
For CLOUD deployments, do you manage call plan migration and assign dedicated account managers to each customer?			
For CLOUD deployments, do you build trust and demonstrate solution confidence by reporting real-time network status publicly online?			
For ONSITE deployments, do you offer both in-person and online training academies to fully certify my IT team?			

5 | UC Value Proposition

When considering your investment in UC, vendor pricing needs to be competitive, but should not be the primary determining factor when choosing a solution. Instead, focus on the value created by adding new collaborative functionality and features. You'll also want to keep an eye on hidden costs and the total cost of operations.

Hidden costs aren't always apparent, but can reduce your project ROI. The lowest price may result in the highest cost if you factor in the potential loss of business due to poor call quality and unreliable service. A poor user experience will reduce adoption levels, lowering expected productivity gains. A UC system that stitches together apps from multiple vendors will increase IT administrative, integration and maintenance expenses.

The best comparison of vendor pricing will include a review of Total Cost of Operations. A TCO analysis considers capital investment, implementation costs and operational expenses for the first and coming five years of service deployment.

The RIGHT Vendor Will Answer YES:	V1	V2	V3
Does your VoIP solution offer highest-quality telephony performance backed up by Service Level Agreement (SLA) guarantees?			
Does your UC solution offer a superior user experience with all apps and features integrated into a single solution?			
Do you offer flexible subscriptions and licensing bundles so I will pay only for services I use?			
For CLOUD deployments, can my administrator self-provision new users and add/remove services on-demand via a web portal?			
Can I maximize the return on my ONSITE investment by migrating to an all-CLOUD deployment incrementally?			
Can I extend the value of my ONSITE deployment by adding new services on-demand from the CLOUD?			
Do you have a third-party analysis calculating the TCO of your UC solution?			

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6 | Vendor as a Business Partner

The most important consideration when choosing a UC vendor is built on partnership and trust. Every deployment is unique. The right vendor will listen to your needs and draw from years of experience providing solutions that work for businesses just like yours.
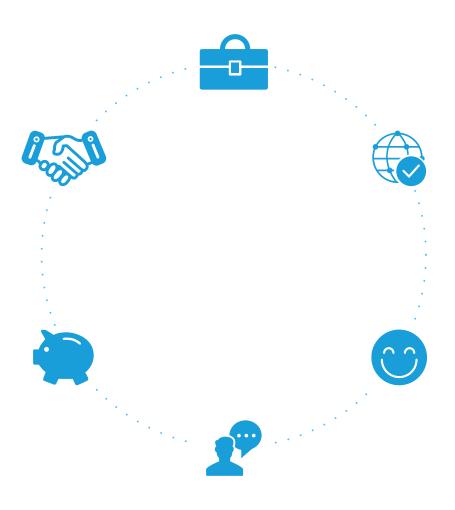
Consider each providers' brand, longevity and reputation in the marketplace. Also consider how each vendor is positioned for the future. Do they have the ability to deliver customized solutions that will enable you to improve the customer experience, differentiate your business and better compete, today and tomorrow?

The RIGHT Vendor Will Answer YES:	V1	V2	V3
Does the partner's approach to working with you feel customer-centric, consultative and focused on meeting your unique needs?			
Can the vendor demonstrate experience serving other businesses within your specific vertical industry?			
Can the vendor provide case studies and testimonials that show how their solutions can match your requirements?			
Do you feel confident the vendor has the technical expertise to support you as necessary, both before and after implementation?			
Have you researched vendor assessments from industry experts, the trade press, technology partners and the reseller community?			
Does the vendor has a clear, future-forward roadmap so your UC solution will keep pace with future technology development?			
Does the vendor's value proposition meet budgetary needs while delivering the right mix of reliable unified communications?			

Conclusion

The right unified communications vendor is a strategic partner that will understand your unique needs and propose a business communications plan that will help you grow your business.

Taking the time to compare providers and assess their solutions will pay off when you find a vendor that's the best fit for your UC needs. We hope these 6 key considerations have helped with that process.

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