5 Questions to Ask Your Prospective UCaaS Provider

Introduction

In order to remain competitive in today's global marketplace, organizations must constantly improve customer service, reduce IT overhead, and increase efficiency—most often, leveraging the same number of resources or less.

This may seem like an impossible feat, but cloud-based solutions such as UCaaS (Unified Communications as a Service) has enabled IT departments to be viewed as business drivers rather than cost centers. Companies looking to take advantage of a cloud-based unified communications (UC) strategy need to consider the shift from a myriad of business perspectives.

How will Provider X's solution serve specific departmental needs as well as the requirements of the organization as a whole?

Will Provider Y be able to better equip us with the required tools to simplify our communications infrastructure while increasing collaboration and user productivity?

Here are five key questions to ask any potential UCaaS provider before making a decision that will affect your business each and every day:

1. Is your UC solution a true cloud offering?

(Ask for a supporting explanation.)

This is an extremely important question, as it could impact your organization—and your bottom line—significantly. There are true cloud solutions, hosted solutions, and hybrid cloud solutions in the market today, that all fall under the "cloud solution" umbrella. So, how can you easily tell the difference? Here's a high-level description of each option:

Cloud	Hosted	Hybrid
• A true cloud UC solution offers full PBX functionality in addition to conferencing and collaboration needs on a single, global platform. • Feature enhancements are implemented by the UC vendor so there are no product version challenges and all users have the same user experience regardless of physical location or primary data center assignment. • Disaster recovery should be built-in, not bolt-on, and included as a part of the overall UC solution. • Customers reap the benefits of platform-wide enhancements such as integrations with other enterprise cloud applications.	• With a hosted solution, the PBX and any other hardware needed to support your UC solution is hosted at the UC vendor's data center(s) • You may have one platform supporting your voice calls and another for conferencing and collaboration needs—separate technologies hosted in the vendor's data center(s). • You may pay for a separate disaster recovery solution or reserved capacity for failover— which may be a manual process for the vendor, resulting in downtime between the time the data center goes down and when the backup data center is "switched on" and ported over properly. • The user experience may or may not be consistent from one environment to the other. • As your organization grows, you may be charged a large sum for capacity purposes (e.g. Capex investment that the vendor may pass along to you).	• Hybrid cloud is another way of saying partly on-premises. Often times legacy UC providers will offer a hybrid solution as a means to transition on-premises customers to the cloud. • Hybrid cloud solutions do not extend the same cost benefits of a true cloud solution, as you still need to manage and maintain the on-premises hardware and also provide product releases manually per location. • This may be a viable option for large enterprise organizations that have invested heavily in on-premises UC solutions in the recent past that would like to leverage existing investments and are not in a rush to be a 100% cloud shop just yet.

2. How will a cloud-based UC solution increase productivity within my organization?

Below are some factors to consider.

1. First and foremost, consider service uptime. There are vendors in the UCaaS market, like Fuze, that guarantee reliability and uptime—with service credits. QoS-enabled networks can make all the difference in the world. If your employees are experiencing network degradation on phone calls and during virtual meetings, they're not being productive. By implementing a high-quality UCaaS solution, your employees' workdays instantly become more efficient.

2. Purchase a UCaaS solution that your users will want to use. Find a solution that is designed for the consumer but built for the enterprise, and user adoption will follow. All users have different wants and needs—you can't expect a one-size-fits-all solution to work. Some employees may prefer the mobile user experience and others may prefer a desk phone; either way, make sure you have a solution to meet the needs of your customers, the users. Once your user adoption goal has been achieved, your team is on their way to staying constantly connected with one another (in addition to contributing to your ROI).

3. Make it simple: find a single solution that meets all of your business' global communications needs. A true UCaaS solution should include enterprise voice, messaging, audio and video conferencing, contact center, and web collaboration as components of the overall solution. Including all business components onto a single, global platform allows users to easily switch between communications modes to collaborate and make decisions quicker than ever before.

4. Integrate with other cloud applications that your organization uses today. Take a Salesforce.com integration for your sales representatives, for example. As an IT director or CIO, you may not get excited about a seamless integration with an application that you don't use, but integrations that appeal to LoB owners will increase adoption and provide the business with rich data and control of your organization's confidential data. Avoid shadow IT—and the frustration that goes along with it—by including LoB owners in your decision-making process. Build your internal champions to gain mindshare. It may seem like a complication to the overall vendor selection process, but it will save time in the long run.

5. Free up time for your IT staff previously managing and maintaining your on-premises communications solution. With a cloud-based communications technology, they focus on other IT initiatives and priorities. By offloading this work to your UCaaS provider, your IT staff will save several hours per week—at least. Your end users will have all of the up-to-date features and functionality of the UC solution at their fingertips without IT intervention.

3. How do you support a mobile and distributed workforce with your solution?

Many organizations are now opting for a mobile-first strategy, replacing traditional desk phones with smartphones and tablets. Why are businesses focused on a mobile-first strategy? Millennials are quickly becoming the most influential population in the workforce and over the next few years, will make up the majority of the workforce. Mobile phones have come a long way over the years. Dropped calls are nearly a thing of the past at this point—they've come so far, in fact, that many people use mobile phones as their primary means of communication.

When choosing a UCaaS solution, be sure to ask about the mobile solution. Pay close attention to the application—specifically the look and feel. IT teams tend to focus on the functionality of an application, whereas non-technical folks expect a modern look and feel in addition to a full feature set. If you want your end users to actually use the solution you choose, be sure to find one that is similar to what they already know and use every day as consumers.
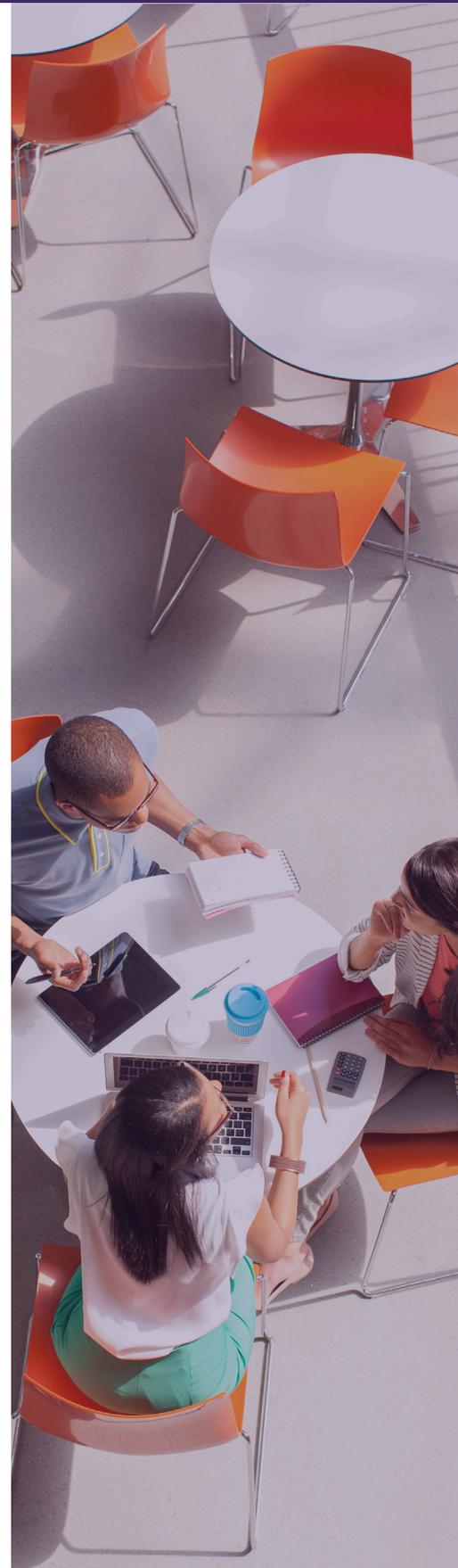
4.What is the process to expand my UCaaS solution to accommodate business growth, including needs outside of the U.S.?

A true cloud communications platform will grow with you, simply and seamlessly. Adding a new user or a new location should be a matter of licensing and provisioning—that's it.

As businesses grow, it becomes increasingly more important to have a proper disaster recovery solution, which includes distributed architecture design with automatic failover. Your business communications platform is the lifeline of the organization, and you can't take the risk of downtime. If you are considering a UCaaS provider with only a single data center, don't. Failover to another piece of hardware located in the same location is not sufficient for enterprise disaster recovery purposes.

If you are expanding your business across the globe, it's important that you look for a solution that provides a localized calling experience for users located outside of the U.S. It seems like a no-brainer, but believe it or not, many UCaaS providers do not offer localized calling experience with their solutions. Lastly, ask about emergency services.

Example: An employee located in London dials the VoIP business phone for emergency services. What happens? This is often overlooked until an emergency occurs. We encourage you to think ahead and address this prior to choosing a UCaaS solution.

5. What is the implementation process?

With traditional telephony taking a back seat to software-driven cloud communications platforms, it is critical for business leaders to have a future-proof unified communications technology roadmap that combines both IT and telecom goals into a single, integrated technology strategy.

Chances are your telecom experts understand your telephony needs, and your IT experts understand your user application needs. In order to realize the benefits of a cloud communications platform, you need a holistic view of the technologies that exist in your organization today, the desired outcome for your organization, and a team of true unified communications experts to efficiently and effectively bring it all together. Partner with UCaaS providers that offer cloud communications expertise to help you design a solution to meet your specific business needs and implement the solution in lockstep with your Project Management Organization.

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