



5 MUST-ASK QUESTIONS

WHEN CHOOSING A BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS VENDOR



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Hyper-connected. 24/7. Always-on. Pick your adjective for today's business environment. But no matter how you classify it, the current speed of business puts pressure on organisations like never before. And your ability to quickly find and communicate with the right people, access data, and exchange information can make the difference in business success or failure.

With unified communications and collaboration (UCC), you can address these challenges by helping people to connect more efficiently and intuitively. You can use UCC to bring together multiple forms of communications, like voice, video and data services, and software applications into a single environment, making it easier to connect. Business processes improve as a result.

When you embrace UCC in your business communications, you can increase employee collaboration and productivity in three major ways.

First, it can reduce communications latency by making it easier to find the right person and get an answer to a business question. Second, it can help you to manage workflows by making it easier for employees in multiple locations to work on projects. Third, adopting a complete UCC strategy lets your employees communicate the way they prefer by eliminating the need use a specific device or be in a set location.

Studies have shown organisations save time and money by reaching people on the first try, switching between methods of communication to improve information exchange (e.g., turning a chat session into a multi-party conference call or video conference with a few mouse clicks),

reducing expenses and employee downtime due to travel, extending office applications to mobile workers and giving employees more flexibility to work from any location.

One study by the network integration company Nexus showed more than a 60 percent of firms using UCC report saving three hours a week per mobile worker. Imagine how much more you could accomplish if your employees had 12 more hours of productivity a month.

UCC can include components like:

- Instant messaging
- Presence – knowing if a contact is free or busy
- Unified messaging – the ability to retrieve all your messages from one central location
- Conferencing applications – to connect larger groups and allow them to share information and ideas
- Teamwork applications – to coordinate work on group projects
- Video conferencing – on your PC, mobile device and using room-based systems
- Mobile applications – extending UCC to smartphones and tablets

FIVE QUESTIONS TO ASK

The benefits of UCC are well established, but like any other technology, it's essential to know what to look for in a UCC system prior to implementing it. Here are five essential questions to ask when choosing a business communications vendor to maximise productivity and return on investment.

1. Is the solution truly integrated?

Some solutions flying under the UCC banner are really a collection of disconnected platforms, each with distinct hardware and or software and individual management tools. To really take advantage of the cost-saving benefits of a UCC solution, pick one that allows your IT administrators to manage all of the organisation's collaboration tools using a single interface.

It also helps speed deployment if the management interface includes templates that make it easier to add new users and applications, and allows the entire solution to be provisioned from Active Directory, saving valuable time for your system administrator.

2. Does your vendor offer flexible deployment options?

Some UCC offerings are hardware based, some can be virtualised, and still others are available as a service. Each option has its advantages and shortcomings, making picking the right one a headache. What's more, your business needs can change rapidly, and a solution that works for you today might not be ideal down the road.

To make sure you don't strand any investments as your IT strategy changes in response to the business climate and technology innovation, pick a solution that's built to give you freedom and flexibility to choose and evolve over time. This will help to lower the total cost of ownership over the lifecycle of the solution. It will also help you avoid being forced to make a cloud strategy decision today in advance of a fully developed plan—and lets you migrate over time at whatever pace makes sense to your business.

On-premises today, in the cloud tomorrow, as a service next year. Your solution should be able to scale at the same speed you do.

FIVE QUESTIONS TO ASK

3. Will the solution integrate with how you do business—today and tomorrow?

While UCC solutions should be internally integrated (see point #1), they don't operate in a bubble. Instead, they have to fit in with your existing IT infrastructure and business applications.

That means whatever UCC solution you chose should have the ability to integrate with, and add functionality to, leading business applications and IT frameworks.

These can include common office applications such as Microsoft® Outlook®, IBM® Lotus Notes® and Google®, and other UCC application tools, like Microsoft® Skype for Business®, ensuring that your employees can communicate using their tool of choice. It can also include applications offered as a service, like Salesforce.com®.

This integration is usually accomplished through application programming interfaces, or APIs, and leading solution providers often have robust developer ecosystems to provide support and certification for custom integration work.

Beyond business applications, your UCC solution should also integrate with how different groups or roles perform within your business. For example, call centre agents who interact with clients should be able to resolve customer issues in a single call by being able to locate and interact with knowledgeable employees in the back office, which requires integration between various systems. Sales and mobile employees may also have specific, role-based requirements.

Whatever unique requirements you have, or may need to plan for, make sure your system is ready to integrate with them.

4. Is the solution optimised for mobile?

More and more employees are on the move or working remotely. It's important to provide them with an in-office experience no matter where their days take them. That means rather than mimicking desktop design and functionality, mobile clients should be built from the ground up to work natively on mobile devices. It should also be extremely easy for employees to get up and running on their mobile devices through automated provisioning, which will save time and money for both mobile workers and for your help desk.

Finally, it should provide a uniform experience across all devices, which helps facilitate employees switching between their mobile devices, both corporate and personal.

5. Does your vendor have a track record of innovation?

UCC technology is constantly evolving. There is a range of new innovations on the horizon that promise to make UCC even more effective. These include WebRTC, which will help embed UCC functionality into web applications, and team collaboration applications, which will allow groups of employees to plan and track projects from start to finish.

You'll want to choose a vendor with a history of delivering solutions with carrier-grade reliability, so that your business-critical applications are always up and running and communications remain open between your employees, customers, partners and suppliers. And as the popularity of UCC as-a-service continues to climb, you'll want to make sure your vendor also has deep experience with cloudbased subscription services, and the ability to easily mix and match how your solution is delivered based on your specific requirements.

Choose wisely

Whichever business communications vendor you ultimately choose, the most important thing you can do is set your priorities and requirements ahead of time. A little extra work on the front end can save you years of headaches after implementation. Know what you need, don't get distracted by shiny capabilities your company won't use and be sure you build in flexibility for the future, because the pace of technology isn't going to slow down anytime soon.

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