

BUYER'S GUIDE

CHOOSING THE RIGHT CLOUD COMMUNICATIONS SOLUTION FOR YOUR BUSINESS

Why you need one, what's available and key purchase considerations



Why you should read this guide

Enabling greater flexibility and productivity without the need for large capital investment, the benefits of Cloud Communications enable businesses to free themselves from the limitations of traditional, office-based phone systems.

Given the growth in the market for Cloud Communications, there are now a number of different solution variants available. So when you are ready to choose your solution, you need to be sure it matches your business needs and ways of working – allowing you to take full advantage of all its benefits. It is important to appreciate that not all solutions are equal in terms of functionality, flexibility, management complexity or resilience.

The right solution for you will depend on the size and type of your business and your IT strategy going forward.

We have written this guide to explain why modern businesses now need Cloud Communications, to outline the different solutions available to you and to highlight the key areas you should consider when making your purchase decision.

See inside to discover:

- The advantages of Cloud Communications
- The different types of solutions available
- Key purchase considerations
- Key questions checklist



The advantages of Cloud Communications

This page at-a-glance

- What are Cloud Communications?
- How they compare with on-premise PBX phone systems
- The real benefits are not just financial

Cloud Communications are business communications solutions provided by a third party service provider and are accessed over the Internet or a dedicated network connection. The cloud service provider is responsible for all hardware and software management, and provides the solution to customers on a pay-as-you-go, subscription basis.

These solutions integrate multiple communications services – such as instant messaging, presence, voice calling, business telephony, mobility features, audio, web and video conferencing, data sharing, call recording and collaboration tools – in a single system. Such comprehensive capabilities are clearly superior to traditional PBX phone systems, which typically provide only voice services.

When you consider this superiority alongside how capex-intensive traditional PBX systems are, it's no surprise that many small and medium-sized businesses are moving to Cloud Communications.

41%

The Cloud Communications share of the total market is forecast to increase nearly 6 times to 41% over the next 5 years.¹



Beyond the financial benefits

The real value of Cloud Communications to businesses goes far beyond the economic.

Increased efficiency

By freeing your business from the constraints of a physical location and a fixed workforce, you can drive operational efficiency.

Seamless experiences

The integration of multiple communications and collaboration services spanning fixed and mobile devices, enables you to provide a seamless experience for employees and customers.

Work smarter, anywhere

With access to all the information and tools they need – anywhere, anytime – your employees can significantly improve their productivity.

Sharpened competitive edge

By being constantly upgraded to the latest technology, you can ensure that you stay competitive and don't fall behind.

Reduced risk

Equipped with built-in resilience and security, you significantly reduce the risk of damaging downtime.

Free up time

With your cloud services provider managing and maintaining the system, you can focus on growing your business, not your phone system.

The different types of solutions available

This page at-a-glance

- The different types of cloud services provider
- The differences in the solutions they offer
- The pros and cons evaluated

A number of different types of Cloud Communications solutions are available, although there are no hard and fast dividing lines between them. Often the differences reflect the background and strengths or weaknesses of the different cloud service providers themselves. So the most helpful way to distinguish between solutions is to understand the different types of providers.

Types of providers:



Network service providers

Many traditional telecoms service providers now offer fully-featured Cloud Communications as an integrated part of their offering to business customers.

With cloud services and the underlying network delivered by the same company, these providers are able to offer strong end-to-end Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with guaranteed quality of service.



IT-centric cloud app providers

These tend to be software vendors with a background in productivity applications, who have incorporated communications functionality such as messaging or voice calling into their IT suites.

As the services they provide are built onto the IT platform, these services are part of the IT suite and not integrated into office telephony systems. Typically such solutions lack many of the features of a traditional phone system and so do not replace your existing phone system – they can only be used alongside it.



Over-the-top (OTT) service providers

These providers offer communications solutions that operate over the Internet.

Whilst these solutions initially tended to offer only limited functionality (such as basic telephony features and text chat), the latest versions now often support enhanced capabilities.

Although these solutions can be lower cost than traditional services, it is important to understand that they run over the public Internet. This means that they are detached from your data network and in some cases there may be a trade-off between service quality and cost.



Traditional network Centrex providers

The first generation of hosted telephony service providers, delivering PBX-type functionality as a hosted service.

Typically they offer basic cloud telephony services that have only limited collaboration and business applications functionality.



Private cloud services providers

These companies provide private cloud services that are deployed in a distinct and secure cloud-based environment, in which only you can operate (essentially you are getting exclusive access to your own private data centre via a private network).


While private cloud offers you greater control and privacy, the financial cost is significantly higher than other options. In general, private cloud services are only feasible for large enterprise organisations.


Key purchase considerations

This page at-a-glance


- Not all solutions have the same characteristics
- The key consideration areas
- Collaboration issues


Whilst all Cloud Communications solutions tend to perform the same basic functions, they are not all equal in terms of functionality, flexibility, management complexity and resilience. When selecting the solution that's right for your business, you should carefully consider the following issues:


 Core voice functionality

 Integration capability

 Scalability and flexibility

 Ease of management

 Your mobility requirements

 Resilience and service levels

Your collaboration needs

Dispersed workforce?

Multi-site businesses and businesses with a high proportion of mobile or remote workers need the ability to collaborate effectively across different geographic locations, and are more likely to require sophisticated collaboration tools such as web conferencing and file sharing capabilities.

Smaller, single site businesses may not require such advanced collaboration tools for internal use. However, they may still need to collaborate with external people such as customers, prospects and partners.

Partner, supplier and customer alignment

If your business has a closely linked supply chain or is reliant on third-parties to deliver services to customers, then collaboration with partners and suppliers is crucial. By expanding collaboration tools outwards, your suppliers and partners become more closely aligned with your business.

Collaboration with customers is also a key consideration. Tools that make it quick and easy for a customer to interact with your business will have a big impact on customer service. This will require a Cloud Communications solution that makes it easy to extend collaboration functionality to external parties (for example, through browser-based tools), and has sophisticated access rules to protect company data without constraining the flow of communications.



Key questions

- What types of activities do your employees need to work on together remotely?
- What tools do you need to improve collaboration within the business?
- Who do you need to collaborate with in the wider business environment?

Key purchase considerations

This page at-a-glance

- Keeping existing voice functionality
- Evaluating your IT capability
- Assessing in-house versus outsource issues

Core voice functionality

A Cloud Communications solution can offer valuable new features, but it's no good if you lose a lot of the functionality that your users currently rely on. Your existing phone system probably provides a lot of features that you take for granted, such as hunt groups and call screening. Those features aren't necessarily supported by all Cloud Communications systems, particularly those provided by traditional IT application providers.

It's vital that your chosen solution has all the functionality required to successfully manage your business day-to-day. Best practice is to audit all of the current communications services actively used by the business, then ensure that your new cloud solution can deliver all of these.



Key questions

- What PBX features do you currently use?
- What are the features that you cannot live without?



Ease of management

How you manage your Cloud Communications solution and what sort of management tools you'll need are crucial considerations. Levels of management simplicity vary dramatically across the range of solutions available.

You also need to consider what management tasks you're happy to do in-house and what you want to outsource. If you're looking for a fully-managed solution, then this will help define the type of service provider you need to work with.

You also need to consider whether it's feasible for you to manage a solution that comprises different elements provided by different providers, or whether you would prefer a 'one-stop shop' solution. If your business has a large IT function, your people may have the time and skills to manage complex solutions, utilising a variety of services from different over-the-top suppliers across different platforms and networks.

If, however, your business is light on IT skills and your communications solution will be managed by generalists, then a single supplier offering a fully integrated solution would be simpler for your in-house IT team. You'll also need to ensure that the provider offers simple interfaces and intuitive management tools.



Key questions

- Who will be managing the service and how skilled are they in IT and telecoms?
- Which tasks do you want to manage in-house and which do you want to outsource to a third-party provider?
- Do you have the capacity to manage an environment where you use different providers for different services?

Key purchase considerations

This page at-a-glance

- The value of integration
- The availability of hybrid models
- Making location irrelevant

Integration capability

As you explore ways to utilise communications to enhance your existing business processes, you're likely to identify requirements to integrate your Cloud Communications solution with both existing business applications and other cloud applications. For example, you might want to integrate with your CRM system in order to improve your customers' experience when calling in, or to improve the productivity of your sales people.

So you need to ensure that you can integrate your Cloud Communications solution with other applications without prohibitive expense. Some solutions offer 'out-of-the-box' integration with popular CRM and productivity applications. The more advanced will offer open APIs that enable easy integration with other apps.

Another area to consider is integration with your existing phone systems. If you have multiple sites, you might not want to switch them all over at the same time. This may be because you're still tied into an existing contract or you haven't fully written-down a previous investment, or perhaps because you want to take a cautious approach to implementation to minimise your risks.

For any of these considerations, you will need a solution that can support a hybrid model which combines cloud services with existing on-premise technology.



Key questions

- What other business applications do you need your solution to integrate with?
- Do you have the resources to manage bespoke integration projects or do you need something which is 'out-of-the-box'?
- Do you need to run with a hybrid model for a period of time as part of a phased transition?

Your mobility requirements

The ability to support mobile workers is one of the key advantages of Cloud Communications compared with traditional PBX solutions. You need to consider how important mobility is for your business and what functionality you need to support mobile workers.

Some Cloud Communications solutions offer a completely seamless app-based experience for the mobile user, with access – from any device – to all the tools and functionality that an office-based user has. Some solutions also enable business's users to be fully integrated within your business' phone network, with seamless moving of calls between fixed and mobile devices, and access to features such as the company directory. Whether your people are at their desks or on the road is invisible to external callers; location becomes irrelevant.

More advanced offerings include the ability for services to be delivered over a combination of fixed, wireless (Wi-Fi) and mobile/cellular networks, with automatic switching to the most cost-effective and highest quality network available as users change location. Fixed mobile convergence can also enable users to have a single number across fixed and mobile devices without the need for a mobile app.



Key questions

- What communications and collaboration tools do your mobile workers need to be effective when away from the office?
- How important is it that your mobile workers are fully integrated with your business's communications network?
- What devices and platforms (such as Android and iOS) do you need your solution to support?

Key purchase considerations

This page at-a-glance

- Assessing flexibility requirements
- Data protection and accessibility issues
- Setting service quality levels

Scalability and flexibility

Different Cloud Communications solutions have different limitations when it comes to scalability and flexibility. Some can easily scale up to handle many thousands of users, and allow you to flex up or down as your business requirements change.

Others are more restrictive, either because of technology constraints or because of the way that the service is priced. This can be particularly important for advanced applications such as call recording or CRM integration, which can become prohibitively expensive if you need to purchase additional server capacity. So you could be making an expensive mistake if you opt for a solution that doesn't offer the flexibility you need.

For example, if your business has high seasonality of demand, it is essential to go for a solution that allows you to scale up and down without a cost penalty. You'll also want to ensure that adding and removing users is a straightforward task, and isn't going to add a significant admin overhead to your costs.

Given the rapid pace of change in many markets, it's also important to prepare for the unexpected. Ensure that whatever solution you choose is able to scale to support anticipated business growth over the medium to long term.



Key questions

- How 'peaky' is demand in your business – how much flexibility do you need to quickly scale up or down?
- Do you have a need to regularly add and remove users (such as large numbers of short-term contractors)?
- How much growth should you allow for if you achieve your business goals?

Resilience and service levels

Cloud takes away from your own business premises some of the direct burden of business continuity and disaster support, but it is important to understand the measures that the cloud services provider has in place to ensure that you and your data are fully protected and always available.

If the ability to maintain communications and access information is vital to the running of your business, then business continuity measures will be a high priority. For example, automatic redirection to a mobile if a desk phone is unreachable could help ensure your customers can still reach you in the event of a fire, flood or network failure.

You should also consider what minimum level of service quality you need. For example, if high-quality, real-time voice and video (for example, for customer communications) is critical, then opting for a combined Cloud Communications and network solution, from a single provider is likely to be most suitable as the service provider will be best placed to ensure constant quality of service.

If however, your business is able to accept occasional drops in service quality (for example, your communications are mostly internal), then it might not be worth paying for a higher-grade service.



Key questions

- What level of resilience does your business require – what's your tolerance to occasional downtime?
- How essential is consistent, guaranteed quality of service for applications such as voice and video?



Key questions checklist

- What types of activities do your employees need to work on together remotely?
- What tools do you need to improve collaboration within the business?
- Who do you need to collaborate with in the wider business environment?
- What PBX features do you currently use?
- What are the features that you cannot live without?
- Who will be managing the service and how skilled are they in IT and telecoms?
- Which tasks do you want to manage in-house and which do you want to outsource to a third-party provider?
- Do you have the capacity to manage an environment where you use different providers for different services?
- What other business applications do you need your solution to integrate with?
- Do you have the resources to manage bespoke integration projects or do you need something which is 'out-of-the-box'?
- Do you need to run with a hybrid model for a period of time as part of a phased transition?
- What communications and collaboration tools do your mobile workers need to be effective when away from the office?
- How important is it that your mobile workers are fully integrated with your business's communications network?
- What devices and platforms (such as Android and iOS) do you need your solution to support?
- How 'peaky' is demand in your business – how much flexibility do you need to quickly scale up or down?
- Do you have a need to regularly add and remove users (such as large numbers of short-term contractors)?
- How much growth should you allow for if you achieve your business goals?
- What level of resilience does your business require – what's your tolerance to occasional downtime?
- How essential is consistent, guaranteed quality of service for applications such as voice and video?

The longer you shackle your business with an outdated phone system, the more growth opportunities you're missing out on.



Making the best choice for your business

This page at-a-glance

- Moving to the cloud is inevitable
- Importance of making the right choice
- Evaluating requirements

The momentum driving the replacement of traditional business PBX phone systems with Cloud Communications solutions is gathering pace. By 2020 the majority of business communications services are forecast to be cloud-based.¹

Given the considerable advantages of Cloud Communications, this trend is no surprise. But it's vital that the desire to achieve the benefits available shouldn't result in businesses making rash choices.

Although they perform the same function, Cloud Communications solutions vary significantly in their cost, functionality, flexibility, scalability and resilience. Some offer a basic communications capability but not much more, others are far more advanced and effectively provide a platform for the digital business of the future.

Before you select your new Cloud Communications solution, it's important to evaluate your own requirements and put together a list of criteria that will give you the solution that's right for you. This guide is intended to help you do just that.

¹ Unified communications: Corroboration simplified, PwC, 2015.

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