

# Unified Communication & Collaboration Applications

11 things to look for in a  
cloud service provider

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## Introduction

Unified communications and collaboration (UCC) solutions combine web conferencing, audio, video, instant messaging, presence, document collaboration, and webcasting tools in new ways to help people connect and work more efficiently. When these tools are delivered as an integrated offering for employees, organizations can simplify how people work together, unify communications, and gain insight into operations and opportunities. Collaboration solutions promise organizations a more seamless flow between employees, customers, and partners — leading to reduced costs and significant increases in productivity.

Running your applications in a cloud, managed by a cloud service provider, has become the model of choice for enterprise organizations and federal government agencies that want the reliability, scalability, integration, and support of a partner without giving up the security, customization, and control of an on-premise deployment that is built by an internal IT team.

By moving unified communication and collaboration solutions to the cloud, organizations save time and money, increase efficiency, and improve their effectiveness. And, by leveraging the domain expertise of a private cloud service provider with prior experience building, deploying, and managing collaboration applications, solutions can be up in running in weeks, not months. This enables IT professionals to concentrate on core areas of their operations.

Deciding to work with a cloud service provider to manage your collaboration applications as a hosted offering is one thing, choosing the right service provider is another. Most service providers take on the responsibility to support the platform that's running your applications and are accountable for the operation and performance of the service. Yet, the best service providers actually become a valued partner of your organization and work on an overall solution that meets your goals and they are equally as committed as you to the success of the program.

It is important to select a cloud service provider carefully. This white paper describes eleven (11) things to look for in a company and lists several questions to ask your service provider about their product and service offerings.

## 1. Relationship and Personal Service

An exceptional cloud service provider is an appreciated partner that helps you achieve your objectives. They should be capable of advising you on how to take advantage of the latest technology and map out a better future. It is important that you enjoy the relationship with your provider. Small- to medium-sized companies tend to be more attentive to specialized needs, build closer relationships, and maintain a personal touch. With the best service providers, you will be assigned your own account manager. To increase effectiveness, make sure you setup a regular meeting to plan out changes and improvements to the service as well as discuss new technology that would benefit the organization in the future.

- **How many other clients are managed by your service provider?**
- **How often does your account manager review your account with you?**

## 2. Industry & Technical Expertise

It is domain expertise that separates amateur service providers from seasoned pros. This technical experience separates those that simply run your applications from those that build solutions for your organization. Be sure your provider has the domain expertise, superior knowledge, and insight in the collaboration space as this leads to more creativity, innovation, and efficiency with the solution. A cloud service provider that is solely focused on communication and collaboration understands consumption patterns, drivers, tradeoffs, and performance expectations of a solution. And, a good provider offers experienced subject-matter experts (SME's) that use their insight to predict complexities, imagine possibilities that might not exist today, and help you adapt quickly to technology innovations.

- **How many years direct experience does your cloud service provider have with communication and collaboration solutions?**
- **Can they provide references of organizations similar to yours?**

## 3. Solution Architects

There are many viable collaboration solutions available today, including offerings from Cisco, Microsoft, Adobe, and Avaya. Solution architects take their knowledge about the various applications and work with clients to align their business and technology goals to map out the best possible solution for an enterprise's needs. One key differentiator of a good service provider is their ability to properly apply the applications and integrate the best-of-breed tools in ways that create the most value for an organization. Some providers lock you into just the one or two solutions they have experience with and this limits your choices. If you want the best solution for audio conferencing, video streaming, document sharing, instant messaging, and presence, then you'll need a technology-agnostic provider that has experience with the widest variety of applications. Additionally, you should look for experience in deploying in multiple environments: on-premise behind a firewall, private cloud deployments, and public cloud environments. This gives you the most flexibility in your choices today and helps you adapt to the changing needs of tomorrow.

- **What solutions and deployment options are available?**

## 4. Customization & Integration

Every business and agency is different with a unique workflow that is optimized for that particular organization. The collaboration products and services you select should not disrupt your current workflow. Deployments may need to be customized for an easier way to sign-on, provide a way to extract data to serve other applications, provide reporting, and connect with other systems on your network through API's. Through these services, a collaboration platform can do more than what is provided out-of-the-box while still maintaining future compatibility and accessibility to upgrades. Also, the emergence of internet-enabled devices including mobile devices (iPhone, Android, and Blackberry) and tablets (iPad) has made inter-operability with mobile devices a strategic imperative, but is inherently creates technical challenges. Your private cloud service provider should be capable of taking on these technical challenges in addition to delivering complicated single-sign-on (SSO) integrations, communication with legacy systems, customized reporting, and more.

- **How willing is your service provider to meet your specific requirements?**

## 5. Full Range of Products & Services

It is important that your solution provider has the ability to match the solution to your business need. A complete cloud service provider will offer additional “point-solutions” which are tools built by the provider to fill gaps in the marketplace, round-out a collaboration application, or provide a solution that addresses a unique market need or industry. These services range from monitoring and reporting tools, specialized applications for peer-to-peer collaboration or large-scale broadcast communication, and dedicated products that meet regulatory compliance. Be sure to thoroughly consider these additional added-value products and services before making a final decision.

- **What other products and services does your cloud service provider offer?**
- **How are these products and services integrated?**

## 6. Data Recovery & Disaster Prevention

A backup and disaster recovery plan is critical for continuity of operations and protects mission-critical data from being destroyed. Some vendors offer a “hot-failover” option for an instant, real-time switch to a live backup system in the event of a network failure. It is critical to choose a managed offering that offers an instant hot-failover option to ensure continued operations regardless of natural disaster or system failures. Also, when evaluating a provider, be sure they are backing-up your data by replicating it to a separate location through a secure, bandwidth-efficient transfer. Periodic tests should also be executed to ensure that the data is retrievable.

- **What kind of redundancy does the provider offer?**
- **How long will service be down in the case of a disaster?**

## 7. Security Standards Compliance

Whenever you select a third-party to manage your data, it is important to look for cloud service providers that meet industry security standards and certifications. One example of a security standard in government is FISMA, a security standard provided by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). The ideal service provider will possess several industry certifications which demonstrate their proficiency in controlling and protecting private data and records.

- **What is their data security policy?**
- **What security standards, accreditation, or certifications do they meet?**

## 8. Monthly Reporting & Analytics

Reporting and metrics are used to track performance and provide insight that enables more informed decision-making at an organization. Is your cloud service provider living up to expectations? Best-in-class service offerings include monthly reports on usage and adoption, also known as “engagement metrics”. It is also useful to view details on the locations of the participants, maintenance updates completed, and ongoing well-being of the network. These reports and metrics offer good visualization into business operations and provide comprehensive knowledge of the factors that drive performance in order to help organizations make more effective, higher-quality decisions.

- **Can the service provider show you examples of their monthly reports?**
- **Is the provider willing to customize reporting for your needs?**

## 9. Dedicated Training & Support

The success of your program is generally tied to usage and adoption. Look for a service provider that assists with the delivery and rollout of the solution to end-users and coordinates acceptance of the applications throughout the organization. Support should be staffed with subject-matter experts (SME) that have the knowledge and expertise to resolve technical issues quickly and can manage proper escalations. Support should be available by all means: email, web, chat, phone, and remote access. Be sure to lock-in a guaranteed response time from your provider since some providers do not operate at night and on weekends. Ascertain how quickly a provider will respond during regular hours, after-hours, weekends, and holidays to determine if this meets the needs of your organization. Also, make sure your provider helps with third-party vendor assistance to avoid having to call several different numbers to resolve an issue. These guarantees should be outlined in a Service Level Agreements (SLA) and may be sold at a premium, but they will pay dividends in saved hours and reduced frustration.

- **Ask the service provider for their SLA agreement beforehand?**

## 10. Reliability and Uptime

The difference between 99.9% and 99.99% is nearly 8 hours of extra downtime per year. This may be acceptable for some clients, but for others, who run their entire business with the solutions being provided understand the extreme consequences of a service failure in the middle of a critical event. And, it is not foreseeable to predict an unplanned service interruption. Service providers that offer 24/7/365 monitoring, live support, and automated hot-failover solutions are able to reach a new level of reliability. Your internal network should never experience downtime and neither should the network of your cloud service provider. Ask your provider for a service guarantee around outages so they do not affect ongoing operations.

- **What is the expected uptime and service-level guarantee around outages?**

## 11. Enterprise Scalability & Global Performance

Global deployments are complex projects that require expert management of people and technology. The success of a project of this scale is dependent on the experience of the service provider. Running collaboration applications in the cloud requires that the service provider ensures that the appropriate amount of infrastructure is allocated to the platform so that applications run smoothly and adjust as usage grows over time. This lowers your initial costs and enables you to easily scale upward over time. If your organization reaches a global audience today or in the future, then ensure your provider offers overseas data centers and guarantees consistent service levels around the world. When reviewing cloud service providers, check that the platform is engineered to scale efficiently to the needs of the largest global deployments.

- **What is the size of the service provider's largest, global deployment?**
- **How is the platform tested routinely for scalability and performance?**

## The Bottom Line

In summary, a Unified Communications & Collaboration (UCC) solution can become a powerful tool that unlocks the potential in your workforce and enables face-to-face collaboration without the expensive travel. Your cloud service provider should become a partner in your business and help you make decisions faster and bolster innovation by getting powerful technologies up and running quickly. Most importantly, they can help you integrate UCC technologies deeply into your business processes and revolutionize how your teams work together to achieve results. To achieve the best adoption and wow your end-users, look for a service provider that has the expertise to become a partner in your efforts. They should add value with extensive training and support, monthly reports, and additional products and services so you have plenty of options from which to choose. And, for your own peace of mind, choose an accredited service provider that meets stringent security standards, has a robust data backup and recovery system, can guarantee 99.99% uptime, and scales globally.

### Complimentary 90-Minute Consultation

To schedule a 90-minute consultation with a solutions expert who can help architect a unified communication and collaboration solution for your organization please email [sales@connectsolutions.com](mailto:sales@connectsolutions.com) or call 510-350-3500.

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