



5 Considerations When Picking a Cloud-based Phone Provider

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Like everything in life, not all things are created equal, and that applies to cloud-based, hosted IP phone services as well. Before signing a contract, there are important distinctions and variations among service providers that businesses need to be aware of.

1

PHONE AND SYSTEM FEATURES

Make sure you are getting the features you need and want. Most providers have the basic features, like hold and transfer, but other providers have unique features like hot desking (using any phone on the network) and mobile twinning (sending calls to both your cell phone and desk phone simultaneously) that can really enhance your operational efficiency and improve employee productivity. Make sure to get a full list of features and an explanation of each before making a decision. And don't be shy about asking the representative how those features can help improve your business.

Another important item to consider is to make sure your phone features work even if your phone is offline or if you have logged out of the device. While some systems have features like call forwarding or call redirect that are "in the cloud," other systems put those features and settings in the device. This could really be disruptive to your business in a time of need. Imagine buying a system that promised disaster avoidance only to find out that those features don't work when you need them most, like when you have a power failure.

Are you getting all of the productivity enhancing features?

Will your phone calls get to you if your phone is offline?

2

EQUIPMENT

This is a big area to keep an eye on. The brand of phones used and the types of phones offered should be an item to check. Make sure that the physical phone you are getting is from a quality vendor. There are a lot of cheap phones on the market from unknown vendors and while they may look great in a picture, the worst thing that could happen is you get the phone on-site only to discover that it is not a quality product.

Also, make sure that you can get the types of phones you want. You may want a small phone for a lobby or point of sale location and a high quality conference phone for the boardroom. Having lots of phone options provides you with ultimate flexibility for all your business applications.

Are you getting quality phones that will last?

3

PRICING/BUSINESS MODEL

Generally, there are two types of pricing models offered by cloud-based phone service providers: unlimited per user plans and custom plans. Unlimited plans are simple to understand but you're often stuck paying for features you may not use and paying extra for features you want while you can easily "over buy" as well.

For example, if you have five users, each on an unlimited plan, you will likely get five phone lines too. The odds of you needing five lines for five users are slim. Custom pricing plans let you tailor the service to your exact requirements.

Another consideration is whether to buy or rent the phones. Buying phones may be a good option for some but if they break or need to be upgraded to enable a new system feature, you are on the hook to pay for new phones. Pricing and business

Are you over-buying or is the system tailored to your needs?

models vary greatly by provider and a few providers offer both purchase and rental options for equipment.

Also, check the pricing for features. While some providers tell you the system includes a feature, they often charge you extra if you need additional quantities. So if you want multiple auto-attendants so customers aren't forced to sit through one long prompt of menus, you may end up paying extra – sometimes a lot.

4

CALL QUALITY

Just like pricing models, there are two general types of cloud-based phone providers. The first we will call “Internet-based providers.” These providers use the Internet to transport calls from your office into their own network and then on to the final destination. This is usually fine for smaller companies or remote users but you need to make sure you have enough bandwidth to support the volume of calls at each site and you may want to manage the Quality of Service on your local network to prioritize VoIP traffic. The Internet is a best-effort network and therefore, the quality of the connection can suffer, and so can your calls.

The second type of provider, which we will call the “managed provider,” offers services over a managed circuit and generally will guarantee call quality and reliability. The connection from your site to the provider’s network is managed and traffic is routed over a dedicated connection, not via the Internet, so quality of service can be tightly controlled.

Some providers offer both Internet-based and managed options, giving you the flexibility to scale up or down as needed, depending on your requirements, applications and budget. Many companies use Internet-based service for smaller locations while large sites have managed services to ensure quality for larger groups of employees.

What happens if you grow bigger than your current set up?

Can your provider manage quality?

5

VENDOR EXPERIENCE

This is probably the most important item to consider. VoIP is not a new technology and the barriers to entry into this market are low. It seems like a new cloud-based phone provider is born every week and while some providers are very good, other providers will fail and you could be left high and dry for voice service.

Take the time to review any and all financial data you can so you know the health of the company you are signing up with. Make sure you know how long they have been providing service and how many customers they support. While the barrier to entry is low, it takes years of experience to develop the right type of service and support structure to support a business customer in the manner they deserve to be treated.

Will your provider be in business in 5 years?

Broadview Networks' OfficeSuite™ cloud-based phone system, with its ACD and Mobile Twinning features, allows you and your business the worry-free, cost-efficient communications solution necessary to provide excellent customer service and grow your business to the highest level possible.

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