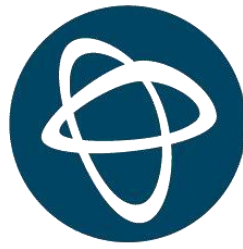


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HOW TO EVALUATE POTENTIAL CLOUD TELEPHONY PROVIDERS AND SERVICES



Cloud telephony is an increasingly popular choice for organisations that put communications at the heart of their business.

You don't have to be large or small to harness its value, and you certainly don't have to be a technology expert to take full advantage of its technical superiority.

However, deciding to go the cloud telephony route is only half of the story.

Choosing the right cloud telephony service can make a big difference to the benefits you can gain.

Who is this guide for?

This short guide offers a practical framework for non-technical businesspeople to conduct the evaluation process for a cloud telephony provider.

You don't need to know telecoms inside-out; this guide will outline the critical areas to consider and pitfalls to avoid. An extensive list of questions to ask is provided in the form of a checklist.

Important considerations

Before you consult the checklist portion of this guide, consider the following three areas that your optimum choice of cloud telephony service should satisfy:

Stakeholder adoption

- Will users willingly adopt it and use it?
- Does it positively or negatively impact upon their workflows?
- To what extent does it enable users to be autonomous (i.e. selfserve) versus dependent upon training, implementation etc.?

Alignment with business objectives

- Does the service consumption model offer you maximum flexibility?
- Will there be contractual penalties/other constraints imposed upon your business?
- Can it measurably improve business process efficiency and user productivity?
- Does it secure your data and address compliance requirements?

Maximising technology advantage

- Does it realise the full economic benefits of cloud, or is it just a 'halfway house' between on-premise and true cloud telephony?
- Are you confident that new service features and capabilities will be developed to support technology

evolution in support of your changing business objectives and working practices?

- Is it a future proof platform, or will it inevitably become obsolete in the short to medium term?

The market landscape for cloud telephony services

If you are new to the technology, it may surprise you to learn that cloud telephony has been around for well over 10 years, and the market for services is mature and competitive.

As with other cloud IT markets, buyers benefit from lots of choice, but they must also be careful to recognise the key differences between how providers/services use (and misuse) the term 'cloud'. For instance, some simply apply the word 'cloud' in marketing materials to give buyers the impression that their services qualify to be considering alongside all other cloud telephony services. The reality in these cases is that such services are quite different, supporting only a narrow set of the available business benefits.

Consider the following two categories of cloud telephony service:



True cloud telephony:

Delivered from an array of secure, geographically-dispersed datacentres operated by the service provider, for carrier-grade availability and resilience, and accessible from anywhere. There is no customer-associated infrastructure per se, and a single monthly subscription is the norm as far as contracts are concerned. All features, upgrades, support and so on are operated by the service provider upon its own proprietary technology.



Hosted telephony:

Sometimes called cloud telephony, this approach sees dedicated or shared traditional PBX infrastructure situated in a datacentre away from the customer premises. This is still an upfront purchase cost in many cases, though this is increasingly moving to a monthly charging basis with long-term contract tie-in. The integrity of the service relies upon a number of interrelated factors including the resilience of the datacentre facility (often a third party or collocated facility), the manufacturer of the underlying infrastructure, and the support delivered by the service provider.

Engaging with providers

The best advice is to withhold your decision of cloud telephony service until you've had a chance to conduct a trial first.

Arranging a trial should be a straightforward process that gives you an accurate picture of how a full deployment would work in practice. If the trial is not straightforward to undertake, or does not offer you the required insight, then alarm bells should be ringing in your mind. Trials should be free, last for at least two weeks, and conducted on a no obligation basis.

Trialing too many different services can be time-consuming. First, whittle them down to one or two candidates and apply the following checklist.

Checklist: Key criteria

Ease of Use

You need to find a service that users can get on with, so that full adoption can be achieved quickly and successfully.

Is the user interface intuitive?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Is detailed user training unnecessary?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Are all common device platforms supported?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no

Charges

Cloud telephony offers advanced capabilities, but that shouldn't mean paying over the odds.

Is the cost structure simple and largely inclusive, rather than full of lots of hidden add-ons?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Are the total charges broadly in line with the market norm?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Are any call rates based upon wholesale prices rather than inflated consumer prices?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Are all costs predictable and transparent?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Are you charged only for users who actually use the cloud telephony service in a given month?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Can you reliably expect to rollout the new service without significant investment in additional project management, training, professional services etc.?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no

Scalability

One of the stand-out advantages of cloud is near-limitless scalability. On closer inspection, not all cloud telephony services offer this without levying extra charges beyond n+1.

Does your service provider possess the experience and resources to handle the present and future demands of your business as it expands internationally?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
If your business doubled in size overnight, would your provider be able to continue service without re-architecting your telephony infrastructure or compromising its service levels?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Can you anticipate the exact future cost of using cloud telephony services based solely on the number of users?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no

Risk

All technology carries an element of risk. Choosing the right cloud telephony provider will help minimise your exposure to potential loss of service.

Can your provider confirm its service availability (e.g. 99.9%) and is this standard acceptable to your organisation's needs?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Can your provider continue to deliver the required standard of service in the event of catastrophic, unplanned disruption to its core infrastructure?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no

HOW TO EVALUATE POTENTIAL CLOUD TELEPHONY PROVIDERS AND SERVICES

Have you been satisfied with the level of resilience and availability of core datacentre infrastructure explained to you by your cloud telephony provider?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
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Features & Capabilities

Cloud telephony services should not be feature-limited.

Unless you have an extremely advanced telecoms requirement, your new cloud telephony service should offer increased features and capabilities that your current service/system, and continually innovate these into the future.

Does your provider deliver more than just the basic PBX features within its standard service offering?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Can your provider deliver more than 150 cloud telephony features?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Does your provider enable its basic cloud telephony service with conferencing, video conferencing, fixed-mobile convergence etc. at no additional cost?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Has your provider succeeded in innovating and improving its service offering over time?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Does your provider have the internal development resources to continue innovating new features and capabilities in response to customer need and market change?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Are you confident that your cloud telephony provider can enable you with a future-proof communications platform?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no

Sector Expertise & Reputation

Cloud telephony services are used across every vertical market sector. Make sure your choice of provider understands the industry you operate in.

Is your provider able to list numerous organisations from the same industry sector as yours, as current customers?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Are you able to speak with any relevant reference customers?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Does your provider innovate any industry-specific features or applications in support of its cloud telephony service?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Does it have a positive national/international reputation?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Can it point to any independently judged awards and/or quality certifications?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Does it maintain a low customer churn rate?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no

Integration & Customisation

Cloud telephony is not an island. Rather it is essential that it supports other communications applications and processes from team collaboration to contact centre functions and UC.

Does your cloud telephony service offer sufficient configurability and customisation to integrate with other communications processes?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Does it support CTI (Computer Telephony Integration)?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no

HOW TO EVALUATE POTENTIAL CLOUD TELEPHONY PROVIDERS AND SERVICES

Does it support Skype for Business integration without the need for costly development projects and extra licensing spend?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Does it integrate with many industry CRM applications such as Salesforce.com?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Does it publish APIs?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no

Ease of Management

You should not be essential to employ a dedicated IT resource to manage your cloud telephony service internally.

Is it easy for administrators to monitor and manage?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Can simple adds, moves and changes and other admin functions be easily undertaken without lodging requests with the service provider?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Are you able to rapidly access a highly skilled support resource within a realistic timescale?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no
Are you able to view real-time status of your cloud telephony service, including planned maintenance?	Yes / no	Yes / no	Yes / no