



The Small Business Guide to Cloud Communications

5 Must-Haves When Choosing a Cloud
Communications Provider



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As a small business, you know how important communication is, whether you're engaging with customers, chatting with employees or interacting with partners and suppliers. In today's digital world, your ability to connect with these key stakeholders 24/7/365 is crucial to your success. You also know that when your workers are collaborating with one another, they are more productive and therefore can interact with more customers throughout the day. Even more important, with the right communication tools in place, your employees are empowered to provide top-notch customer service.

Together, communication and collaboration are the foundation of building strong relations that enhance customer experiences, increase employee productivity and grow your business. But a recent Spiceworks survey found that only one in four organizations are highly satisfied with their current communications and collaboration solutions.

What should you look for in a communications solution that allows you to achieve the outcomes listed above in a way that makes sense for your small business? To start, the communications solution you choose must enable your business to:

- Use voice, chat and video conferencing anywhere, anytime on any device
- Stay connected via mobile apps, company-wide extension dialing, call forwarding and voicemail-to-email audio files

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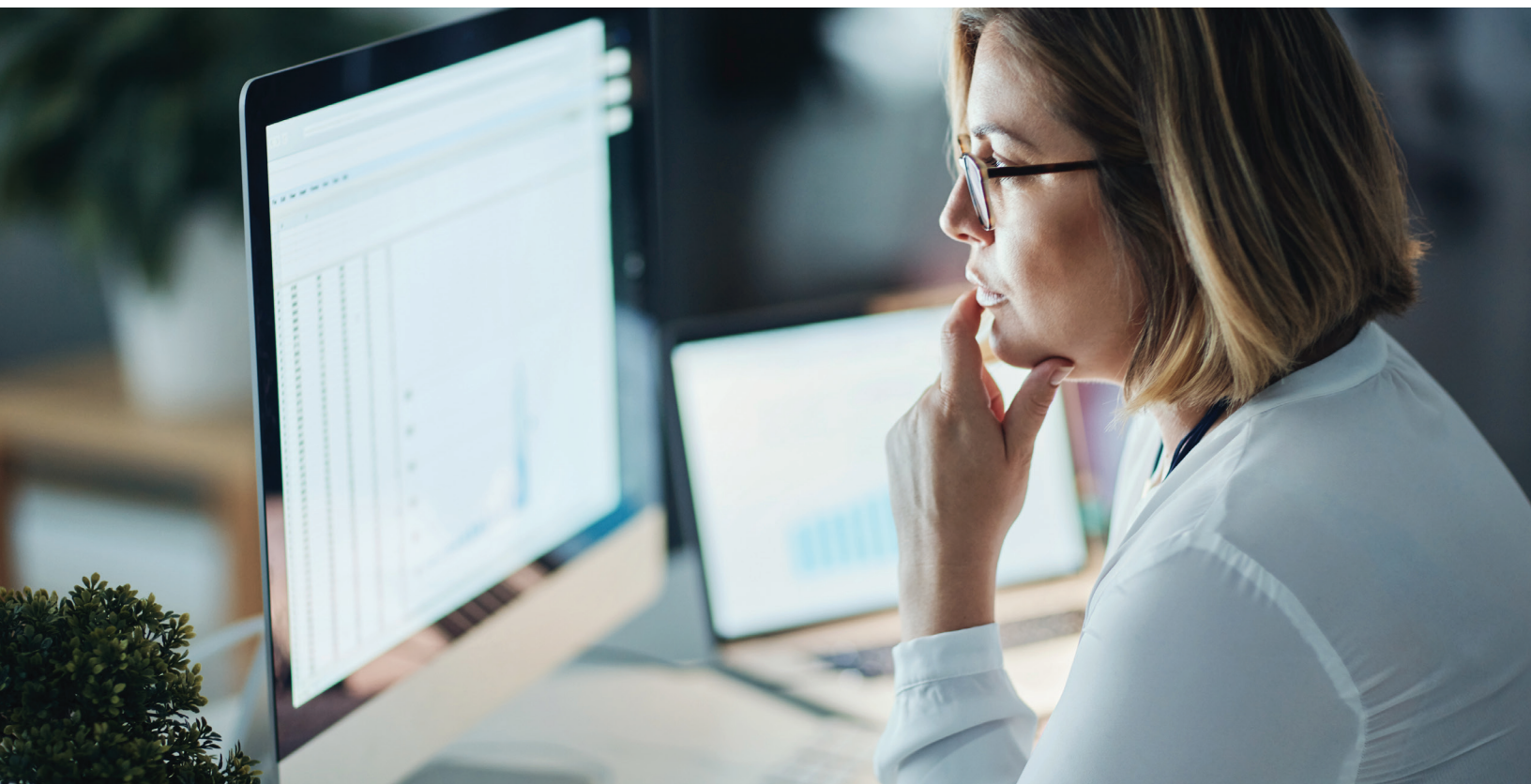
- Participate in real-time conferencing and collaboration without leaving the application you're currently using
- Avoid IT headaches, such as setting up new employees' phone numbers or troubleshooting problems with call quality and reliability
- Save money by eliminating on-premise telephony hardware for each of your business locations and no longer paying onsite maintenance costs to support that hardware

Your company can experience these collaborative and cost-saving benefits—and many more advantages—with cloud communications. In comparison to an on-premise phone system, cloud communications—also known as Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) or a hosted private branch exchange (PBX)—provides the flexibility and power that allows your employees to work smarter and be more productive. These are a must for today's workforce, which is more mobile and often works flexible hours from home or while on the road.

At the same time, moving to cloud communications relieves small business owners and IT staff of the headaches of managing telephony equipment, including upgrading systems and dealing with security issues. With cloud communications, you can enjoy the same features as a physical phone line—plus additional features like cross-platform messaging, file sharing and online meetings—at a fraction of the cost.

Not all cloud communications solutions are created equal, however. Many providers cobble together their products from other vendors and don't guarantee service quality for your phone calls.

How can you choose the ideal cloud communications provider for your business? Here are five key considerations to keep in mind when picking a provider. Follow these guidelines and you can ensure your company will be well equipped to form the connections it needs to grow.





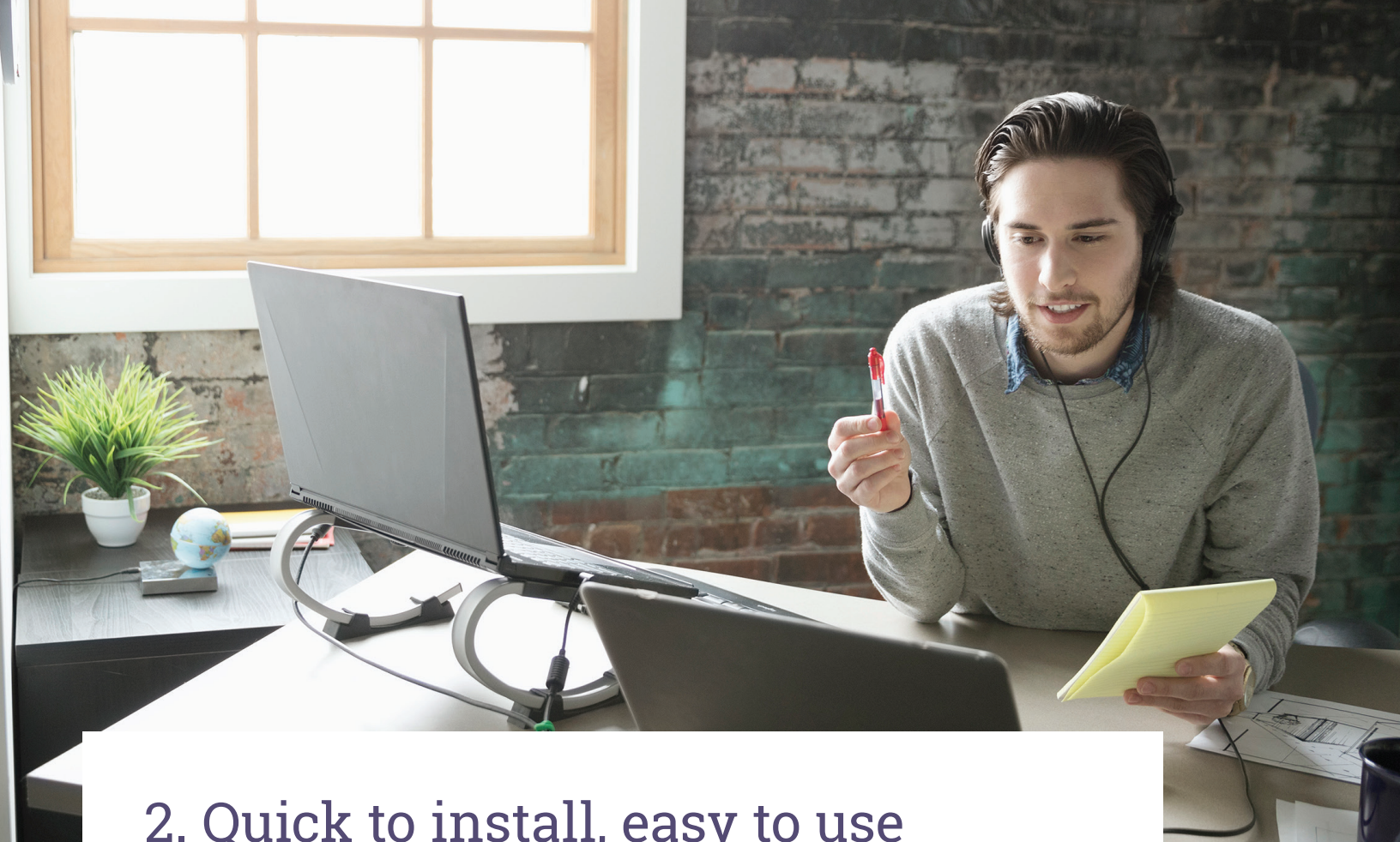
1. The power of instant collaboration

Presence matters. You should be able to stay connected while you're out of the office. This means receiving and making business calls on your mobile devices while still appearing as if you're at your desk. You also should be able to configure your desk phones and mobile phones to ring simultaneously when a call comes in. With email notifications of voicemails, your team can quickly respond to missed calls. Additionally, ring groups can effectively distribute calls throughout departments or work groups so incoming calls can immediately be picked up by the first available team member. No more missed calls.

Be as dynamic as your on-the-go organization. Business texting, chats, instant messaging, availability status updates and online video conferencing enable workers to collaborate and work more efficiently. Cross-platform messaging lets employees connect with other departments, customers and outside partners that use different messaging applications while maintaining a record of conversations for your reference. Video conferencing with features such as screen sharing help employees working in different offices or from their homes feel as if they're in the same room. Put it all together, and there are no limits to your team's ability to be united in working toward critical end goals, wherever individuals are located.

Put a premium on reliability. If you're relying on the cloud for all of your business communications needs, then you want a provider that places a premium on reliability. Many cloud communications providers do not own their data centers and are not able to provide uptime and call quality guarantees. Geographically redundant data centers, encryption across your communications and security compliance are also very important. With these capabilities in place, you can be sure that a snow storm or natural disaster won't leave your business with a busy signal.

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2. Quick to install, easy to use

Limitations become strengths. When you have limited IT staff or none at all, it's important to choose a cloud communications system that's easy to deploy, manage and use. Your provider should administer all the hardware, software and upgrades behind the scenes so you don't have to. Also think about whether you'll have easy access to a technical installation support specialist. This person will deal with challenges such as porting phone numbers from your legacy telephony hardware and setting up call routing for an auto-attendant feature.

Centralized management is essential. Make it as easy as possible for your office manager or other administrator to directly support changes without having to rely on technical staff. Of equal consideration is that no one should be burdened with separate systems to manage different offices or devices. It's also valuable if potential providers offer a customer knowledge base to walk you through your help questions and requests, whether you're in search of troubleshooting advice or how-to guidance. Finally, when it comes to monitoring how your team is using your communications systems, look for a provider that lets you quickly view analytics reports so you can manage team performance and ensure high-quality customer experiences in real time.

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3. All-in-one from one provider

Know what you're really buying. Many companies sell cloud communications systems that are actually made up of other companies' products. Perhaps they're responsible for one part of the solution, such as voice, but they bundle other capabilities—like online meetings—from different vendors.

As a result, their offerings are not always as integrated and complete as you would expect. It's like a car made up of parts from different manufacturers; sure, the car runs, but you won't experience top performance. As you evaluate the best solution for your business communications needs, be sure to find out who actually owns the technology in the system you're buying.

Protect your business, get the latest features. When solutions are cobbled together from multiple vendors' components, problems are just waiting to happen. The lines may not be clear about who is responsible for fixing a particular technology issue when something goes awry. Your business could be left holding the bag. Think about what could happen if a critical bug is discovered in software your cloud communications provider doesn't own, or if you need advanced support. Will you be bounced around from one provider to another? The reverse is also true. When a new system feature is released by one vendor, how quickly will you receive the update? The feature could be held up because it needs to be verified and incorporated into other parts of the solution by your cloud communications provider.



4. Big savings for small businesses

Discover unexpected benefits. With cloud communications, you'll realize savings from not having to support and upgrade onsite hardware. But there's more to it, including the savings you'll see when you take advantage of features such as extension dialing to other office sites to eliminate long distance costs, mobile apps in combination with Wi-Fi to avoid international roaming charges, or built-in call recording that enables your company to do away with other equipment. Find a provider that offers these and other ways for your business to save.

Another benefit of cloud communications is that you're able to more efficiently allocate resources to other parts of your business. IT staff is no longer bogged down maintaining your telephony hardware. Instead, they can focus on tasks that support revenue and your overall business goals. And, of course, your team's increased productivity will allow you to do more business.

Customize your plans. It's important to avoid providers that force you into buying expensive plans for everyone in your company just because a few of your employees need a couple of advanced features. Look for a partner that allows you to mix and match so you can pick the plans that are right for each member of your team. Supervisors, for example, may need access to analytics reports while service reps don't.

Equally compelling is to find a provider whose system helps you control ongoing costs with robust reporting and tracking features and capabilities, such as predictable billing.

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5. Outpace the competition

Fulfill evolving customer and business needs. Fast-growing businesses know that adjusting to changing customer and business needs allows them to stay ahead of the curve. For example, today's consumers are talking less and texting more. So, you'll want a solution that lets you send and receive SMS text messages on computers and smart devices. Providing this means of customer interaction helps customers get in touch with you in the fastest and most convenient way. And it makes it easy for you to remind customers of appointments, update them on changes to business hours or contact information and even send thank-you messages after the sale. It's great if you can preserve those messages in your contact history, too, in case you need to reference them later.

Plan now for adding a contact center later. A growing business may find that it eventually needs to add call center operations. Next-generation contact center solutions should include features such as skills-based routing to connect customers to the right agent groups; integration with critical customer relationship manager systems, such as Salesforce, to drive agent efficiency and a holistic customer experience; and support for customers to use the engagement channel they prefer, such as phone, voicemail, email and chat. Your customers will be happier and you'll be set up for repeat business if you utilize world-class contact center capabilities that include workforce optimization and advanced business phone and collaboration services.

Look for an innovative provider. There are plenty of capabilities that your employees will come to expect from their communications solutions, such as the ability to chat with customers and partners outside of your organization using different messaging platforms. Thinking ahead to how your business will evolve, and how it will do so while providing optimal collaboration for your workforce, must be a part of your company's cloud communications planning.



Transform Your Business and Reach More Customers

8x8 delivers on each of these must-haves, providing small businesses with a complete cloud solution for voice, video, chat and contact center that increases employee productivity and enhances every customer interaction.

You'll get it all without risking security or service availability—8x8 delivers its solution via its own comprehensive platform using globally redundant data centers. 8x8 takes all the responsibility for fixes and upgrades, and prioritizes providing customers with whatever technical support you need. And because 8x8 uses its own technology, it can address user issues and fix bugs immediately.

8x8 lets you message anyone inside or outside of your organization across numerous third-party messaging platforms and supports up to 100 participants in a virtual meeting, giving your business the technological edge it needs to blow past the competition.

Through mix-and-match plans, you can choose the 8x8 service options you need to create a solution that works for your organization. Built with flexibility in mind, 8x8 makes it possible for you to add on new functionality as your business grows, including contact center capabilities. Take the next step in your communications with 8x8 and see the vision you have for your business come to life.

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Ready for the Next Step?

Contact a Solutions Expert to learn even more about how 8x8 integrates voice, video, chat and contact center capabilities into one solution. Call [1.855.465.7904](tel:1.855.465.7904) or visit 8x8.com.

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8x8

8x8, Inc. (NYSE:EGHT) is a leading provider of cloud phone, meeting, collaboration and contact center solutions with over a million business users worldwide. 8x8 helps enterprises engage at the speed of employee and customer expectations by putting the collective intelligence of the organization in the hands of every employee. For additional information, visit www.8x8.com, or follow 8x8 on LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook.

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