

Unified Communications Buyer's Guide





Table of Contents

- 1** Introduction
- 2** Where Do I Start?
- 3** Types of UC Providers
- 4** Quick Reference Table: Comparing UC Solution Types
- 5** Call Quality: The Critical Factor
- 6** Identifying How Your Users Work
- 7** Call Centers: Meeting Customer Demands at Any Scale
- 8** Should Microsoft Teams Be Your Complete UC Solution?
- 9** Integrations: Powering Productivity and Customer Experience
- 10** Key Questions to Ask a UC Provider
- 11** Conclusion



1. Introduction

Collaboration and communication are more important than ever for today's mix of in-office, remote, and hybrid workers. Seamless communication translates to efficiency, profitability, and higher satisfaction for both employees and customers.

In fact, employees have little tolerance for poor communication. A Forrester study found that **93% of employees with a strong digital experience plan to stay with their company**, compared to just **49% of those with a weak experience**. Likewise, **38% of consumers** say they would stop doing business with a company after just one poor service experience.

That's why choosing the right **Unified Communications (UC) solution** is critical. However, the range of options and features can be overwhelming. Will your employees use all the available features? Are you paying for tools you don't need?

This guide will help you navigate today's UC features, compare provider types, and select the best solution for your business.

2. Where Do I Start?

Understanding Unified Communications

Unified Communications refers to a platform that integrates voice, video, messaging, and collaboration tools into a seamless experience. As "UC Today" publisher Rob Scott puts it, "UC isn't just about having the latest tools—it's about transforming how your organization works."

Key Questions to Consider:

- **How many users do you have?** (10 users vs. 1,000 users require different solutions.)
- **Do you have multiple locations or remote employees?**
- **Is your business heavily reliant on phone communication?**
- **How do your employees prefer to communicate?**
- **Do you expect future growth that will require scalability?**

Your answers will guide your choice of provider, features, and budget.



Pro Tip: Your UC provider is not just another vendor—they are a strategic partner in employee and customer experience.



3. Types of UC Providers



International Cloud-Based Providers

Examples: RingCentral, Vonage, Zoom

- ✓ Scalable
- ✓ Global reach and business features / functionality
- ✗ Reliance on third-party network connectivity for call quality
- ✗ Customer service challenges with distant support



Key Considerations:

Will a large provider have the focus on your business you require?



Regional UC Providers

Regional providers offer personalized support and may bundle services like **Internet, cloud, and cybersecurity** for better pricing.

- ✓ Improved customer experience and local support
- ✓ Potentially better pricing when bundled with other services
- ✗ Some providers rely on third-party networks, affecting reliability
- ✗ Security and compliance standards vary



On-Premises UC Solutions

Once the standard for business communication, on-premises PBX systems offer full control over features and security.

- ✓ Total control over system configuration
- ✓ Data stays within company infrastructure
- ✗ Expensive maintenance and equipment costs
- ✗ Limited scalability for growing businesses



Look for providers that own their network and cloud.

For example, a provider that operates a geo-diverse cloud and low-latency network, ensuring better reliability and uptime.



4. Quick Reference Table: Comparing UC Solution Types

Choosing the right UC solution involves weighing factors like cost, call quality, scalability, and provider support. Use this table to quickly compare your options:

Solution Type	Pros	Cons	Call Quality Impact	Scalability
Cloud-Based (Third-Party Network)	Global reach	Limited on-site support, potential vendor blame game	Varies; depends on third-party network	Highly scalable
Cloud-Based (Provider-Owned Network)	Better call quality control, end-to-end support	May have higher costs depending on features	High; provider controls entire service path	Highly scalable
Regional Provider or Reseller	Personalized support, potential for bundled services	Coverage limitations, variable standards	Moderate to High (if provider owns network)	Scales well regionally
On-Premises	Full control, data stays in-house	High upfront cost, limited remote flexibility	High (but depends on number of trunks and equipment)	Limited by hardware capacity
Hybrid Solution	Combines benefits of cloud and on-prem	Complex setup, multiple vendors involved	High (with provider-owned network)	Flexible but complex



Tip: Prioritize providers that own their network to ensure higher call quality and eliminate the vendor blame game.



5. Call Quality: The Critical Factor

Who Controls the Network Controls the Quality

Call quality is one of the most important yet overlooked aspects of UC solutions. Many cloud-based providers rely on third-party networks, which introduces a major risk: **they don't have full control over the service experience.**

When a provider does **not** own its network, businesses are left vulnerable to:

- **Network vendor blame games** — When issues arise, multiple vendors may point fingers instead of solving the problem.
- **Inconsistent call quality** — Latency, jitter, and dropped calls become more likely without end-to-end control.
- **Delayed troubleshooting** — Since providers rely on external vendors, they have less control over resolving service disruptions.

Why a Combined Network & Communications Solution Ensures Better Call Quality

A UC provider that owns and operates its own network and cloud infrastructure eliminates these risks. This approach ensures:

- ✓ **End-to-end control** over call quality
- ✓ **Low-latency, high-performance network** for superior voice clarity
- ✓ **Faster issue resolution** with no third-party delays
- ✓ **Reliable SIP & PRI connectivity** for businesses with on-prem equipment

Even organizations that manage their own on-prem UC equipment must carefully **choose their SIP or PRI provider**. If a provider relies on external network vendors, **quality is never guaranteed.**



Bottom Line: The best way to ensure consistent, high-quality communication is to work with a UC provider that controls the network, the service, and the support—so you never have to tolerate poor call quality or vendor disputes.



6. Identifying How Your Users Work

Remote, Professional Workforce

If your workforce is remote, or typical of a professional user, choose a solution that offers:

- Cloud-based access across devices
- Messaging, video, and calling integration
- Collaboration tools (e.g. Microsoft Teams™)
- Simplicity

Customer-Facing Teams

If your business relies on frequent customer interactions, your UC needs may become more significant. Look for:

- Advanced call management (e.g., call routing, CRM integration)
- Features like voicemail-to-email, analytics, and music on hold
- Omnichannel support for chat, voice, and email
- API integration with business applications and CRM

UC Checklist for Customer-Facing Teams:

- 
- ✓ CRM Integration (Salesforce, HubSpot)
 - ✓ Call routing and priority handling
 - ✓ Admin portal for user management
 - ✓ Low-latency network for reliable voice & video

Untethered Employees (Retail, Healthcare, Hospitality)

Employees in industries like retail, healthcare, and hospitality are often on the move and not tied to a specific workstation. Their UC solution should focus on enabling seamless communication without adding complexity to their workflow.

What to Look For:

- **Flexible phone hardware:** Devices that support various use cases, including mobile handsets, wireless headsets, and in-building mobility solutions.
- **Local, consultative support:** Providers who can be onsite before implementation to understand call flows, call treatments, and specific operational needs.
- **Ease of use:** Solutions that prioritize intuitive interfaces so employees can focus on their work and customer interactions rather than navigating complex systems.
- **Durability and reliability:** Hardware that can withstand demanding environments without sacrificing call quality.



7. Call Centers: Meeting Customer Demands at Any Scale

Why Call Centers Deserve Special Focus

Even small businesses today have basic call center needs. Features like inbound call routing, call queuing, and basic analytics are essential to ensuring customers aren't left waiting. As your organization grows, these needs become more complex, making it crucial to select a solution that scales with you.

Small Customer Facing Teams:

- **Inbound call routing:** Directs calls to the right person or department quickly.
- **Basic call analytics:** Provides insights into call volume, wait times, and service levels.
- **Business continuity:** Supports remote agents to keep service running during disruptions.

Scaling for Larger Teams:

For organizations with more extensive call center operations:

- **Inbound Call Queuing:** Calls queued in the cloud benefit from virtually unlimited capacity, ensuring callers aren't turned away during peak times.
- **On-Premises Queuing:** Limited by the number of trunks connected to on-site equipment, potentially leading to dropped calls during high demand.
- **Advanced Routing Models:** Incorporate skill-based routing, priority queuing, and multi-site call distribution.
- **Omnichannel Support:** Manage customer interactions across voice, chat, email, and social media.

Business Continuity Considerations:

Having a cloud-based call center solution ensures:

- **Uninterrupted service** even if the primary call center location experiences outages.
- **Support for remote and hybrid workforces,** allowing agents to answer calls from anywhere.
- **Quick scalability** to handle sudden spikes in call volume without additional hardware.



Bottom Line: Whether you're a small business with basic needs or a large enterprise requiring sophisticated call center solutions, choosing a provider with cloud capabilities ensures scalability, reliability, and a better customer experience.



8. Should Microsoft Teams™ Be Your Complete UC Solution?

Why Microsoft Teams Is a Popular Choice

Microsoft Teams has become an essential collaboration tool for many businesses, offering chat, video conferencing, file sharing, and project management in one platform. Its widespread adoption stems from its seamless integration with the Microsoft 365™ suite, making it a familiar and convenient option for end users.

When Teams Can Serve as Your Primary UC Solution

- ✓ **Ideal for organizations already using Microsoft 365:** Employees benefit from a unified interface for collaboration and communication.
- ✓ **Basic calling needs:** Teams can handle voice and video calls effectively for organizations with straightforward communication requirements.
- ✓ **Device flexibility:** Teams-compatible desk phones and meeting room equipment extend its capabilities beyond the desktop and mobile app.

When Teams Might Not Be Enough

While Teams covers many collaboration needs, it may not be the best standalone UC solution in certain scenarios:

- **Complex integration requirements:** Organizations needing deep integration with CRMs, ERP systems, or contact center solutions may find Teams lacking in flexibility.
- **Advanced call center functionalities:** Features like skill-based routing, extensive call analytics, and large-scale call queuing often require a more specialized UC solution.
- **High-volume calling environments:** Teams alone may not support the scale or quality needed for large, customer-facing operations without enhancements.

Enhancing Teams with the Right Calling Plan

Adding a calling plan to Teams transforms it into a full UC solution. However, choosing the right provider is crucial:

- ✓ **Look for providers that own their network and have direct peering with Microsoft,** ensuring higher call quality and reliability.
- ✓ **Avoid solutions that “shoehorn” their service into Teams** with complex, patchwork integrations that create a clunky user experience.
- ✓ **Prioritize providers focused on quality and simplicity,** delivering a seamless experience for both IT administrators and end users.



Bottom Line: Teams can be a powerful UC solution—if paired with the right calling plan and provider. Consider your organization’s complexity, integration needs, and quality expectations before relying solely on Teams.



9. Integrations: Powering Productivity and Customer Experience



Why Integrations Matter

In today's fast-paced business environment, speed and efficiency are non-negotiable. Your employees need immediate access to the right data and tools to serve customers quickly and effectively. Unified Communications solutions that integrate seamlessly with your existing business applications — like CRMs, ERPs, and collaboration platforms — can significantly boost productivity and enhance customer experience.



The Benefits of Robust Integrations:

- Faster response times: Access to customer information in real time improves service quality.
- Higher productivity: Employees spend less time switching between platforms.
- Improved data accuracy: Automated data syncing reduces manual entry and errors.
- Enhanced collaboration: Integrated tools keep teams connected and informed.



Without proper integrations:

- Productivity declines as employees juggle disconnected systems.
- Customers experience delays and frustration from disjointed communication.
- Scaling your business becomes more challenging and costly.



Pro Tip: Look for a UC provider that supports direct integrations with key platforms like Salesforce, Microsoft Teams, HubSpot, and other mission-critical applications.



10. Key Questions to Ask a UC Provider

- 1 What is your SLA (Service Level Agreement)?
- 2 How does your support team operate? (Local vs. offshore)
- 3 Do you own your cloud and network infrastructure?
- 4 How do you ensure security and compliance?
- 5 What integrations do you support (e.g., CRM, ERP)?
- 6 What happens if voice or video quality is poor?



11. Conclusion & Next Steps

Choosing the right UC solution means balancing cost, features, scalability, and support.

The best UC platform will:

- ✓ Align with your team's work style
- ✓ Integrate seamlessly with existing tools
- ✓ Provide reliable performance on a secure network



Need help making the right choice?

FirstLight offers feature-rich, secure, and fully supported UC solutions designed for businesses like yours.



Next Step:

Schedule a Consultation!

www.FirstLight.net/UC

1-800-461-4863

