3 Things to Think About When Choosing the Right Hosted VoIP communications Provider

Specific issues to consider when deploying a high quality, global communications system that integrates into your workflows.

Introduction

With all the industry talk about moving to cloud, the decision to move to a hosted VoIP provider should be easier. The reality is there are many aspects to consider before embarking upon such a move. Selecting a VoIP or cloud communications provider is not as simple as the marketing material would suggest. You need to assess your existing capabilities, the company's expectations of new capabilities, balancing the urgent requests with the needs and the future of the company. While there are still many challenges when considering a cloud communications provider, with some simple research and being armed with the right questions to ask, the experience can be simplified and become an extremely positive one. By moving to the cloud, not only is it easier to take advantage of new capabilities without going through extensive equipment deployment cycles, but you can also free up critical resources to focus on other projects. With careful planning, moving communications to the cloud provides ample opportunity for integrations into key business applications providing a strong foundation for your company to grow. Allowing IT to contribute to the overall health and growth of the company, isn't that the real reason we love playing with all this technology?

The 3 Key things you want to know

Every Hosted VoIP provider is going to have a list of key issues for you to consider. Unsurprisingly, these are generally constructed around what they consider to be their unique feature list. One interesting aspect of a move to the cloud is balancing the need for features with the need for speed of deployment and long term reliability. In short, the discussion shifted from a product capabilities focus to providing a reliable service, it permanently moved away from accessing vendors by a series features, weighted for importance. The discussion shifts to quality and reliability.

With a hosted VoIP vendor it becomes more important to understand how they provide what they do, not necessarily what they do. The issue manifests itself when capability upgrades, network improvements or service interruptions happen. How a company deals with these, and the capabilities they are built upon, are critical to your long term success.

As an example, on the surface all cloud business communications providers look similar. Regardless of their actual size, they all claim to be a leader in some aspect. Breaking this down into three buckets makes the overall picture easier to see.

1. Reliability

The issues impacting the reliability of a hosted VoIP solution are many. From network provision, redundancy to equipment reliability, there are a many issues they deal with by the minute to maintain a service for you. The core philosophy the hosted VoIP provider adopts tells you a lot about how they think about the experience they provide to you. Looking at their focus on the segment of the market, the type of customer, costs involved all tell you a lot about the downstream experience you can expect.

To provide a service, some form of call control is hosted in the cloud, over which a variety of services are provided to the market. How hosted VoIP vendors provide this varies

considerably. Rather than highlighting one vendor over another, we'll take a look at what is considered the premier approach: active/active.

There are a couple of different approaches to active/active. These are normally described as an active/active datacenter and an active/active application. This is not intended to be an extensive review of the two approaches, there are much better articles focused on running applications in datacenters. We'll focus on the primary differences; active/active data center is when there are more than one datacenter that can service your application at any given point in time. All storage is synced, the databases are synced and the security policies are synced.

This provides a high degree of confidence that the underlying infrastructure used to deliver your hosted communications service will survive knowable situations. However, what this doesn't do is provide confidence in the actual hosted application itself. For that you need to consider active/active applications. When combined the hosted VoIP provider has the ability to provide continuous availability, which is considered to be the benchmark to maintain uptime and reliability you need. If the provider you are considering cannot claim continuous availability built upon active/active, give serious consideration to what that may mean when the inevitable service disruption happens.

2. Global Approach

With some of the basics covered on reliability, you can now think about how distributed your company is and what should be considered for global deployments. Despite many claims to the contrary, most US based providers of VoIP and video communications are just that, US based. Their efforts to maintain a reliable, robust and easily recoverable service are focused first and foremost on the US market. Deployment of a global communications solution often involves workarounds and sub optimal approaches to deployments outside the US. Simply put, many vendors take shortcuts to deliver what seems like a global service. To provide a service nationally can be complicated, to do so globally adds a layer of difficulty that many providers chose to ignore.

If you require hosted VoIP communications in more than one country, separating the ability to provide local

numbers, points of presence and actually having globally distributed datacenters becomes important. Here's why; every service provider can deliver a local DID number, it's extremely easy to do, only those that have invested in datacenters globally really understand what it means to deliver reliable service across different geographic locations. The easy approach is to bring all the call handling to one central location, typically in the US. Simpler and cheaper for the cloud communications provider to develop and deploy, but comes with all the issues previously discussed about reliability and recovering in the event of a service disruption. Having globally distributed datacenters is more difficult and costly, but provides the highest level of service.

It also requires that the cloud communications providers thinks about a global approach as they often have operations in different countries. This philosophical difference can often make a huge difference in how the service is provided in local countries. The differences can be small but extremely impactful to the uptake of a new service introduction. Only a cloud communications providers that has multiple global points of presence can address the performance expected as you transition to cloud from a premise based solution. It manifests in superior call quality and confidence that you will not be impacted by service disruptions.

3. Integration

The next area of consideration is your workflow. We are long past the scenario where a communications solutions starts and ends with the phone. While it's indisputable that the primary requirement for any cloud communications solution is being able to pick up a handset and call someone, it's increasingly important to have key integrations for various workflows the company has developed.

For example, the sales leader is often seeking more ways they can leverage the investment made in the CRM solution. Therefore integrations into packages such as salesforce.com become table-stakes. It's a similar story in the world of customer support, packages such as Zendesk form the backbone of the workflow. Choosing a cloud communications provider that can integrate into your chosen applications framework can make the difference between a successful adoption and several frustrating years of trying to work through disparate systems.

Selecting a hosted VoIP provider that can customize and integrate into your environment makes the solution highly leverageable and simpler to adopt.

What it really takes to deploy

Beyond the three key issues of reliability, global approach and the ability to integrate, you now need to consider what it takes to deploy a cloud communications solution. While not having to deal with equipment/upgrades/boxes is considered one of the main benefits of moving your communications to the cloud, there are still several issues to ponder. Many of your users will have an opinion about the type of phone placed on their desk and the applications

on their mobile devices. This will influence heavily how most of your users will perceive the new solution. The argument over the future of the desk phone continues to rage between the vendors. Suffice to say they all have a perspective depending on their roadmap.

You need to consider what your users want. This can generally be broken down into two profiles; those that are deskbound and those that consider themselves to be a mobile worker. Increasingly we see even those that work in an office to be a mobile worker. They arrive at an office location and spend their day going from meeting to meeting, only returning to their desk for short periods of time.

Hence the trend towards delivering many of the capabilities on a mobile application, this mobile first approach addresses the old thinking of desktop applications. A combination of class leading phones that can support applications or integrations and a mobile application delivers the best balance for your user community. Looking towards cloud communication providers that can support the right devices, integrations and handsets can make your deployment considerably easier.

Impact on your users

The most obvious changes will be the new mobile application they have to download and learn, the new handset options and menus and the change in the company dial plan. To make the change over painless, your chosen vendor should be able to deliver a project plan covering all aspects of the change coupled with training on how the new capabilities function.

What to expect from the relationship

This is where the cloud communications providers really separate themselves. Due to the very nature of a communications solution, you must consider a provider that can offer you 24/7 support. This becomes even more critical on a global deployment and again, can provide you with insights into how the hosted VoIP provider actually thinks about service provision. The principle difference from the old premise based approach to communications is that the hosted VoIP provider is responsible for the quality of the service, not you.

Selecting a service provider that will allocate you a dedicated service person to address the long term relationship is pivotal to your long-term success. Surprisingly this isn't a common practice unless you are considered a marque account. These dedicated customer support representation can work through the longer term requirements to personalize the communications solution to your requirements. Nothing is a greater indicator of your future success than a hosted VoIP provider that is willing to make this significant investment.

Another aspect worth considering is how the phones are maintained on an ongoing basis. Many of the cloud communications providers consider the handset to be an ongoing inconvenience, and as such, treat it that way. A best in class practice is to mimic the cell phone market, providing upgrades every few years. An even better approach adopted by a few providers is to provide free upgrades after a certain period of time.

Summary

Look for a hosted VoIP provider that can deliver the quality and reliability you need, and can do so on a global basis. Consider how it's going to integrate into your existing and future framework, how flexible and what API's are available. Then look towards how the hosted VoIP provider is going to help you be successful, with a cloud solution it is a long term relationship, not a one-time buy. Select the hosted VoIP provider that can provide you with dedicated help during the deployment and managing the ongoing relationship is critical.

Chose a hosted VoIP provider that can address these issues, not simply the biggest in the industry. They may not have become the biggest on the same principles that you value.