# The Guide to Evaluating
Cloud Phone Solutions

Overview

Phones are the life blood of most businesses, and making the move to the cloud isn't nearly as simple as advertised. Complicating matters is the bombardment of IT teams by everything cloud. IT teams are busy – and doing a full evaluation of cloud phones and vendors is a time-intensive process, which means it may fall lower on a priority list until a change event forces the issue. While cloud phones may have seemed in the beginning like a "nice to have" or even a passing fad, all indications point to the fact that cloud phones are a "when" not an "if" proposition for most companies.

The wide-spread adoption of cloud phone services is being driven by a variety of factors. Capitalizing on the growing BYOD paradigm, improving cost-savings and leveraging more robust feature options are common benefits that many companies want to harness. However, a closer look at cloud PBX reveals other important, more nuanced benefits, like the ability to right-size feature sets to employee groups, improve communication visibility and analytics and optimize bandwidth.

As businesses start to explore cloud PBX options, they realize there are many layers to the decision. Given the evolution of feature sets, it's not uncommon to be unfamiliar with everything cloud phones can do beyond a dial tone. As companies contend with increasingly mobile workforces and the need to integrate their communications platforms with other systems, the decision to implement cloud phones goes beyond a simple pricing exercise and feature comparison to a multi-phase strategic initiative.

With the right approach, planning and resources, organizations can simplify the cloud phone and unified communications evaluation process and get a system that fits their budget and serves their needs both today and into the future.
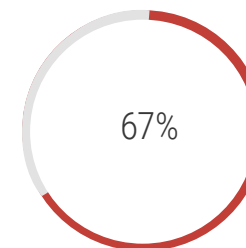
67% of employers report increased productivity from telecommuters.
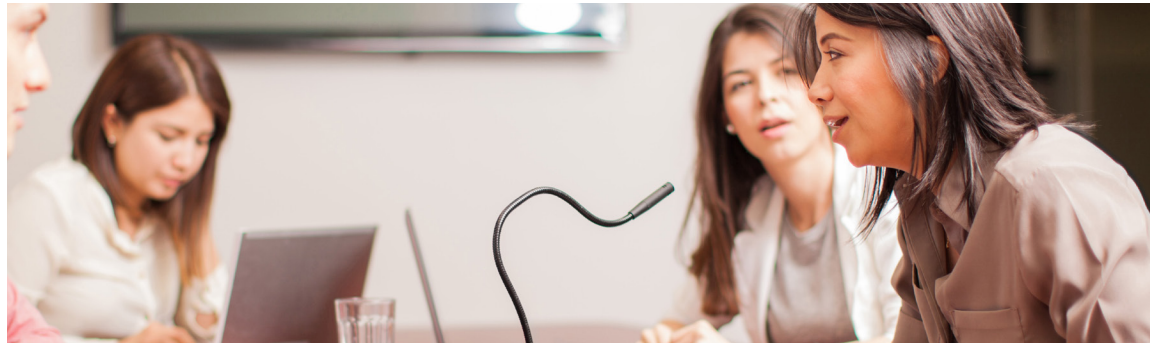
Cloud Phone **Discovery**

Cloud phones can offer tremendous upside to any organization, but the size of investment required and the resulting impact a cloud solution can have on a workplace suggests companies should plan carefully and proceed with caution. In order to critically evaluate if a cloud phone investment will align with the needs of a business and end-user base, companies should plan on a discovery process and ask themselves the following five key questions.

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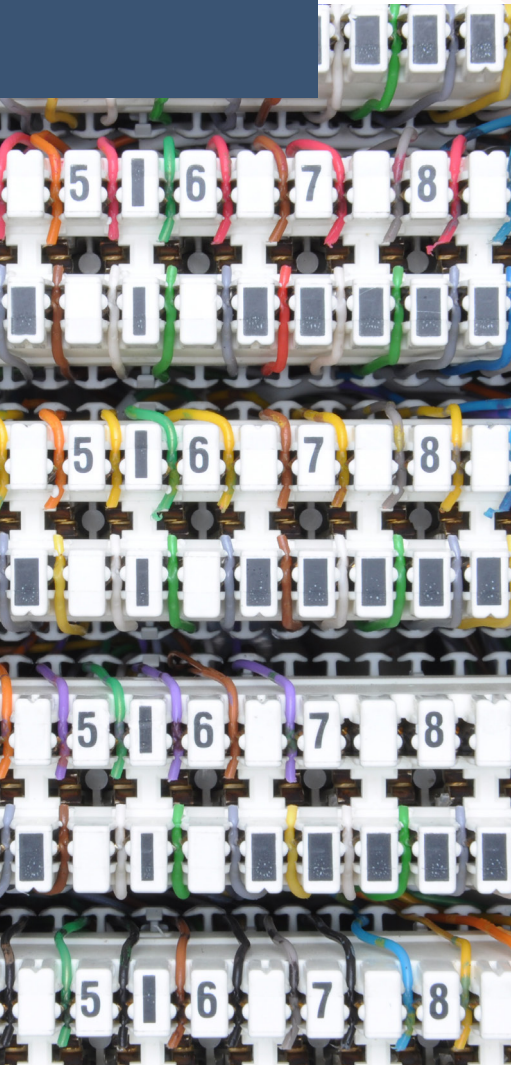
What do we need our **phone system to do?**

It sounds simple, but companies should only pay for a phone system that does what they need it to do. Unfortunately, aligning phone systems with actual business needs and goals is often easier said than done. And despite offering the potential for more seamless and intuitive collaboration across platforms, departments and office locations, cloud phones often challenge business leaders and IT teams with sifting through a variety of features in order to make a smart investment.

This decision-making process should move beyond basic product evaluation and instead focus on evaluating business operations and work habits. For example, meetings, conferences and phone calls are areas where many businesses look to become more efficient. However, business leaders often lack the insight to identify exactly how to accomplish these goals and how technology can help. Yes, a cloud phone solution can arm teams with analytics and reporting that offers more visibility into things like meeting length and call frequency, but the evaluation

process should go deeper than that. *How many users are there? What devices are they using? Can we continue to attract a new generation of innovators or leaders using our current system(s)? What do we know about how we communicate with our teams and our customers? How could we gain efficiency or cost savings if we understood it better? What data and information is most important to capture? How much does it cost us in time, reimbursement and culture for our staff to work without communication tools? What are we currently spending on our communication systems?*

Asking these questions will help companies think critically about the nuances of their business and user base and approach cloud vendor and product evaluation in a more holistic, goal-oriented way. But businesses can only set this process in motion by first asking what it is their phone system needs to do. The telephone continues to be the third leg of the stool for most companies. It should be doing more for your money.

2

Is our network ready for it?

A common misstep companies can make in the cloud phone evaluation process is overlooking their network capabilities and limitations. A cloud phone solution may provide every collaboration benefit a company needs, but they may lack the bandwidth capacity or connectivity to fully utilize the technology. This can have a damaging impact on areas that are critical to achieving maximum ROI like user adoption and quality of service.

Companies should ensure they have stable Internet service and, whenever possible, a fail-safe connection. SD-WAN has made monitored networking with voice data prioritization and real-time failover more affordable than ever before. With this in mind, they will likely want

> **For large enterprises, the average cost of critical application failure can be as high as $1 million.**
>
> *- IDC*

Why not enhance your phone system, back up your Internet connections with real-time failover and right size your connection speed all at once? Select Communications can do it all, and if there is money to be saved in the process, we will find it.

a solution that enables user devices to combine with regular broadband and optimize between these two connections. This is especially important now that more business-critical systems are shifting to the cloud and connectivity solutions like SD-WAN are exploding onto the market and into the purview of IT teams.

For these reasons, it's important that companies enter the cloud phone evaluation process with a strong understanding of their network requirements, capabilities and limitations.

3

Who are our **end users?**

End users are one of the most critical yet oft-neglected elements of cloud phone investments. It may seem obvious, but companies should enter all product or vendor evaluation discussions with a keen understanding of exactly who makes up their user base.

Unfortunately, many companies have lowered their expectations for their phone system so much that they have simply accepted that "it is what it is." A general knowledge of how employees would use their phones if they had more robust features can quickly highlight the ROI. A cloud phone investment also provides a future-proof system that is constantly updated with security features and new applications. Once users see they have communication options, the organizational culture as a whole becomes much more adaptable. And this adaptability allows companies to be competitive and attract the next generation of great employees.

In reality, the "who are my employees?" question is less about communication habits and phone usage and more about a user's role, mindset and day-to-day pain points. For some, phone usage may involve little more than placing and answering calls from their desk – and

they have no desire for their phone to do more than that. Others may work remotely or from the field and view their phone or mobile device as a critical asset to their workday, using it to hold meetings, manage their schedule, share files with teammates and access business-critical applications.

An understanding of who makes up a company's user base can also shed light on what type of training and onboarding support may be needed in the early stages of cloud adoption. A company that is geographically dispersed with thousands of employees of varying age groups may require a far more intensive onboarding process than an SMB with a remote workforce of millennials.

Translating this understanding of employees to making a smart cloud phone investment can be challenging. Many companies benefit from grouping their employees based on phone usage requirements and needs. Grouping users based on their specific pain points helps inform decisions on everything from the number of licenses for a solution to the specific features their cloud phone needs.

4

How do our employees **prefer to work?**

Backed by a keen understanding of who their end users are, companies should then go one level deeper to understand the unique qualities and nuances of their user segments. Like any phone system, cloud phones should enable an employee's work style – not confine it. This is increasingly important in today's work environment. At many companies, the days of the traditional nine-to-five work schedule are over. Powered by concepts like BYOD, the rise of teleworking and an influx of younger employees, the workplace is becoming more flexible, mobile and employee-focused.

Because of this, a cloud phone investment should always take into account the demands and preferences of the user base. Features that are optimal for one employee may not fit for another, even if they're in the same organization or on the same team. One employee may prefer to have their voicemails transcribed and emailed to them. Another may work from home and need remote access to applications like CRM and file hosting platforms.

Understanding user needs is one of the best ways companies can be prepared to differentiate the technical, feature- and service-oriented offerings of one cloud phone solution from another. If a workforce is large, work and communication needs vary substantially or budget isn't a concern, a business may find value in a more robust cloud phone solution. Should workday pain points be fairly universal across a user base, a more limited cloud phone investment may be the way to go.

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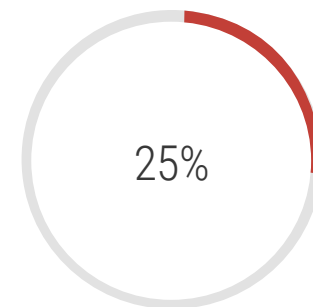
Percentage of teleworkers in the modern workforce.

- *Gallup*

5

## How much control do we have right now over mobile devices?

Workplace mobility can't come at the expense of visibility and security or compliance. To identify a cloud phone solution that aligns with both user needs and organizational requirements for security and management, companies need to be aware of how mobile devices are currently controlled within their network and what levels of control they will need going forward.

Today's BYOD generation saddles IT teams with new challenges and considerations, one of the greatest being the ownership of business contacts. For example, a sales rep might have the contact information for a number of leads and prospects stored in his or her phone. If that employee leaves the company, that business-critical information leaves as well because it's siloed within a personal device.

Cloud phones offer a single hub where things like proprietary files and contact information can be stored regardless of geographic location or device. However, this increased control and centralized access should also support an employee base's mobility needs.

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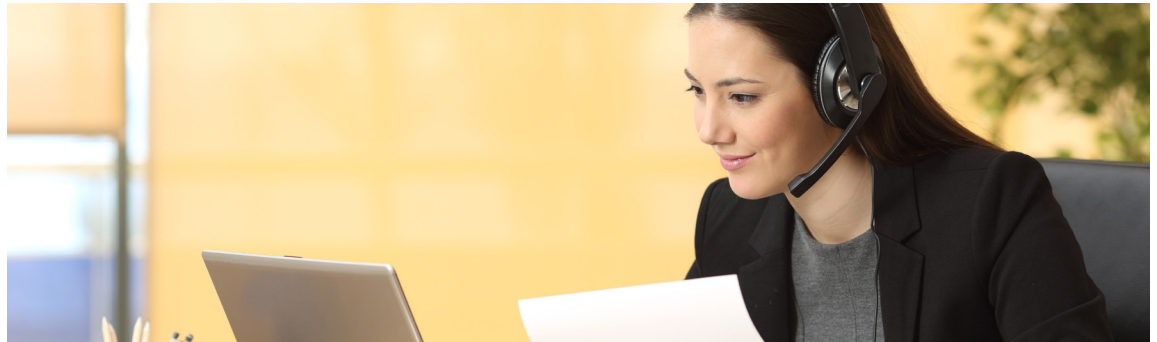
Summary of **Cloud Phone Options**

Once companies start answering these five questions, there are several solution options to consider. However, not all solutions are created equal. Given how quickly many vendors, products and buzzwords are emerging, it's helpful to dissect precisely what each option truly represents for an organization.

Traditional carriers are one way to go. In the past, this service was enabled by rooms full of copper wires and switches, and **while telecom carriers may offer a cloud solution, they've got a lot tied up in infrastructure, which detracts from a true soft phone solution.** While traditional carriers may offer a cloud PBX option, it's often not purpose-built cloud communications. Companies should strongly consider whether the solution fits their unique requirements – and whether a traditional telco has the agility and business focus to deliver a robust cloud phone option.

Another way to go is drop-ship carriers. These are often affordable stop-gap solutions consisting of carriers that can provision quickly but lack the holistic services that empower teams with a long-term, future-proof solution. Drop-ship carriers often operate at the minimum point of entry and do not provide the needs-based network and user evaluation support a company might receive from a reseller.

If a company is convinced that the cloud is the way to go, they can go directly to cloud service providers. While working with providers may offer companies greater technical functionality and innovation, the process may strap IT teams with extra legwork. Evaluating cloud providers and service levels will likely fall to internal staff, as will managing on-going updates and maintenance of the company's cloud environment.

Key Considerations & Solution Advisement

For busy IT teams that see the benefit of working with a knowledgeable specialist, the answer often lies in leveraging a cloud phone advisor/VAR. The best way to ensure the maximum ROI on cloud solutions is working with a cloud advisory resource to perform the requisite due diligence, which includes simple yet critical processes like…

Outlining a comprehensive list of business and end-user requirements

Fully vetting providers that can accommodate business objectives

Understanding pricing and terms that ensure flexibility and scalability

Identifying training, onboarding and user adoption needs

With cloud phones, companies can get measurable cost savings, robust feature sets and strong QoS – but only if employees actually take advantage of the technology. While these benefits are critical, one of the biggest challenges to cloud phones – and any new technology – is user adoption. By working with an experienced cloud communications advisor, companies can be sure that the post-implementation steps of onboarding and training employees on new cloud phone technology yield maximum employee buy-in.

Cloud communications advisors can also be great proactive resources for setting cloud phone investments up for success. They can equip companies with objective insights that enable leaders and IT teams to make smarter investments. Companies gain the perspective to evaluate their requirements, assess network limitations and opportunities and compare providers for the best rates and features. Plus, teams get the support to get users up and running quickly, easily and affordably.

Cloud Phone Spotlight: Local Marketing SOLUTIONS GROUP, INC.

Local Marketing Solutions Group, Inc. (LMSG) provides marketing automation technology and a comprehensive set of supporting marketing services to national and international brands. They specialize in driving revenue through local sales and marketing channels using the most efficient marketing tools and solutions.

LMSG decided to make the transition to a fully virtualized environment. This transition was spurred by a desire to accomplish three main goals:

- Maximize costs savings by cutting CapEx associated with traditional brick-and-mortar locations
- Increase sales staff efficiencies with more feature-rich communication tools
- Gain greater visibility into analytics and leverage insights from big data

Because marketing is LMSG's core competency, their major concern was finding a communications partner who was knowledgeable in the cloud phone space to help them navigate myriad vendors and their solutions. LMSG needed to find a telecom advisor who would operate as an extension of their business to craft an optimal cloud-phone solution.

Eventually, LMSG found Select Communications. Through this collaborative partnership, LMSG and Select worked together to find and implement the optimal cloud phone solution. LMSG realized positive results within a few weeks of deployment. They reported reduced costs, improved efficiency and greater visibility in their phone usage.

> " **For us to not have any experience with that software, we were looking for a partner to stand shoulder to shoulder with us - and Select Communications did that.**
>
> *- Justin Faull, Director of Marketing*
> *Local Marketing Solutions Group, Inc.*

Why **Select Communications?**

Today's modern cloud communications advisor should be a researcher, consultant and problem solver for your company. Driven by a client-centric approach to cloud phones, Select Communication collaborates with clients and ensures the right tools are deployed to meet specific business objectives. In addition to gaining a solution that meets their business and user needs, companies benefit from true cost analysis: an apples-to-apples comparison of various vendor pricing and solutions. By understanding their customers' needs and pain points and collaborating with a broad network of leading cloud phone providers, Select ensures the best rates possible and offers a long-term business partnership that provides value today and into the future.

Select Communications provides the broadest product selection and highest quality communication services to organizations worldwide, with a time-saving, one-stop shopping opportunity.

Combine this with excellent customer service and support, it is easy to see why we have the best customer retention in the industry.

In addition to our Tier 1, low-cost solutions, Select Communications is different in the way we work with our customers. With so many products and services available, our veteran sales executives take the time to understand each customer's unique business challenges and present solutions that provide the best balance between features and budget considerations. We take tremendous pride in showing our customers how much we appreciate and value their business.