Welcome to the UCaaS Era


Enabling a remote work environment by unifying communications seamlessly, flexibly and securely

Following the rapid shift to remote working after the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, many enterprises have been forced to find ways to enable workplace collaboration for their employees, as well as deliver responsive (yet touchless) customer care.

Even before the pandemic, the predominance of cloud-based services created new business models for enterprises—offering new opportunities for customer engagement and business growth.

Driven by these two historic shifts, CEOs and IT departments alike are reckoning with how well their companies are delivering on their brand promise. One thing is clear: services and solutions that once seemed nice to have are now vital for doing business.

While unified communications (UC) isn’t a new concept, employee work styles, customer expectations, and the realities of a long-term—even permanent—work-from-home labor force are placing overwhelming demands on traditional, on-premises voice and data networks.

A cloud-based model for unified communications and collaboration, established as Unified Communications as a Service (UCaaS) allows organizations to adopt cloud-based services, lower costs, reduce complexity, improve employee productivity and enhance customer experiences.

Executive takeaways

You will learn the following from this whitepaper:

1. Digital workplace requires new tools and technologies
2. The factors that are driving the move to the cloud
3. UCaaS enhances workflows, efficiency and productivity
4. Your choice of network provider matters
The emerging digital workplace

The global pandemic has accelerated both interest and investment in remote collaboration solutions, which has caused enterprises to accelerate their IT roadmaps. But IT teams are challenged to deploy new remote working solutions on obsolete network infrastructures. Many organizations still support capital-intensive on-premises (private branch exchange) and video conferencing systems. Others, especially in the education and state/local government segment, continue to use antiquated Centrex service that dates back to the early 1960s. None of these current solutions are capable of fully integrating the new features and functionality that a distributed workforce requires—specifically, secure video conferencing and team collaboration tools that enable users to share files, create meetings and more in real time, all within a single user console.

Features such as

Virtual face-to-face meetings between constituents in different cities, states, countries and sometimes even different continents. These virtual conversations are the next best thing to actually being in the room together.

Team collaboration tools that enable users to share files, create meetings and more in real time, all within a single chat console. Bots add customization by executing specific functions or workflows unique to an organization.

This move to cloud-based UC explains why sales of traditional premises-based telephony and video conferencing systems are on a steady decline. “Enterprises continue to implement and expand their UC footprint with 88% of companies implementing or expanding IP telephone and PBX features.” Collaboration technologies and tools are moving off-premises, where customers can take advantage of the low installation and maintenance costs that an as-a-service model offers, as well as subscription payment model.

Between 2015 and 2020, the number of employers offering a work from home option grew by 40%\(^2\). By 2028, one study estimates that 73% of all departments will have remote workers\(^2\).

What’s driving UC adoption

“Which of the following items are driving your adoption of unified communications?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>65%</td>
<td>Improve employee productivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61%</td>
<td>Increase collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53%</td>
<td>Improve organizational ability to support excellent customer experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48%</td>
<td>Provide better communications tools for home and mobile workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45%</td>
<td>Improve performance against competition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44%</td>
<td>Provide better communications tools for partners and suppliers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42%</td>
<td>Provide better business continuity/disaster recovery</td>
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<tr>
<td>42%</td>
<td>Develop better products and services</td>
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<tr>
<td>39%</td>
<td>Simplify the set of tools employees need to communicate and collaborate</td>
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<tr>
<td>32%</td>
<td>Drive down software and infrastructure costs for communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>27%</td>
<td>Aging applications and infrastructure (e.g., upgrade of a legacy PBX)</td>
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<tr>
<td>24%</td>
<td>Engage smartphone-centric, tech-savvy workers</td>
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Base: 165 IT and network decision makers in North America

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Windstream Enterprise, May 2018.
What’s driving the shift from on-premises into the cloud?

Numerous interrelated factors are driving this shift:

1. **Changes in the workplace**
   
   Between 2015 and 2020, the number of employers offering a work from home option grew by 40%. By 2028, one study estimates that 73% of all departments will have remote workers. This means the enterprise network—along with enterprise applications—needs to be securely accessible outside the office. Also, as workplaces become increasingly global, their applications are now always-on, 24x7. Workers need tools that support easy, fast, secure and effective collaboration wherever they might be, on whatever device is closest at hand.

2. **Changes in the workforce**
   
   It’s not just where we work that’s changing—it’s who’s at work, too. According to a Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data, more than one-in-three American labor force participants (35%) are millennials, making them the largest generation in the U.S. labor force. They also occupy increasingly senior positions, with 83% of workers seeing millennials managing Gen Xers and baby boomers in their offices. For these and other tech-savvy workers, technology expectations come from their consumer experiences, causing what many refer to as the consumerization of technology. They want technology that adapts to changing needs and circumstances, just like the apps and services they use every day to connect with their friends and families.

3. **Advances in technology**
   
   Legacy PBX and video conferencing systems are expensive to buy and maintain, and are still not that easy to operate. In stark contrast, cloud-based solutions built around software-defined technology are transforming most every aspect of enterprise computing. The cloud enables great simplicity and accessibility, and is more cost-efficient. As such, these technically sophisticated yet easy-to-use cloud-based solutions align much better with today’s workplaces and workforces.

4. **Moving from CAPEX to OPEX**
   
   Cloud-based, XaaS (X as a Service) solutions can be purchased on-demand as-is, anywhere or anytime they’re needed. They involve no up-front purchase cycle or formal budget and provide predictable costs based on consumption. Buyers can trade complex below-the-line capital expenditure (CAPEX) outlays—with their ongoing amortization and depreciation schedules—against recurring, well-defined operating expenses (OPEX) instead. In particular, pay-as-you-go, as-a-service solutions make costs not just more transparent, but more affordable and attainable as well.
The future of communication and collaboration in a unified cloud

With the overall software market moving towards flexible, mobile solutions that boost efficiency and productivity, organizations are naturally looking to unify their communications systems by integrating voice, video, messaging and collaborative web functionality. The integration of these once disparate vital tools enhances organizational workflow, operational efficiency and productivity.

Just as video has become increasingly important, dynamics for digital collaboration are also changing rapidly. Use of voice, video, messaging and web-conferencing technologies are all individually booming. As most of us know first-hand, a large percentage of meetings we engage in every day involve remote participants through some kind of communications channel.

Business decision-makers must face a new reality in which a robust and modern unified communications and collaboration system is ready and able to support a rapidly-changing workplace and workforce. Now there is no “corporate network versus the public Internet” work paradigm, there is only “the network.” Solutions must work consistently and continually anywhere, across multiple platforms—including Windows and Mac for the desktop, and Android and iOS for mobile.

Those same UC solutions must also provide all the necessary productivity tools, improve the quality of meetings, support constant mobility and ensure security, while also delivering improvements in total cost of ownership (TCO).

The recent pandemic has accelerated the rise of the mobile-first office. The mobile-first office accommodates the many ways in which people like to collaborate. Users want to launch collaboration sessions quickly and seamlessly while communicating with customers, co-workers or business partners. For example, they want to be able to start a chat with a colleague through instant messaging, then be able to elevate that chat session to a call, then even higher by adding a web meeting to share screens, make annotations to a document, add another colleague to the brainstorming mix, share related files in real time, transfer their desktop session to their mobile, and so on.

Legacy systems simply weren’t designed to support the concept of the mobile-first office. Integration, efficiency, flexibility and usability are precisely where legacy systems fall short, and where UCaaS excels.

The multiple benefits of cloud-based UCaaS

In contrast to the narrow uses and inflexible characteristics of legacy communications systems, cloud-based UCaaS solutions deliver multiple and tangible benefits:

**Increased productivity**

Cloud-based solutions quickly unite people with easy-to-use and inviting collaboration and communications tools for a seamless experience from any location or device. Seamless usage and more work accomplished is the cherished outcome that results.

**A platform for innovation and business agility**

In a cloud-based environment, workers can collaborate and share knowledge and experience to support organizational innovation, faster decision-making and task completion rates. The result is improved and accelerated speed to market for new goods or services.
Reduced costs

A pay-as-you-go subscription model for UCaaS means organizations shed the initial cost and complexity involved in purchasing, maintaining and upgrading separate phone and collaboration systems. Instead they can bank on predictable costs directly related to consumption of UCaaS solutions that boost employee productivity and job satisfaction. Other benefits that a cloud-based unified communication and collaboration environment offers include less need for travel.

What to look for in a cloud-based UCaaS provider

Organizations need to understand that selecting a UCaaS provider is about more than simply selecting support for one mobility platform or another, or some collection of communications and collaboration services. It’s also about a business relationship and the ability to help organizations produce the kinds of successful outcomes they always strive to achieve. Prospective purchasers should weigh the following considerations carefully:

- **Adopt mobile-first**

  The solution must support a changing and flexible workplace and should enable employees to use and access real-time communications like video and instant messaging quickly and easily from any device, at any location.

- **Comprehensive collaboration tools and features**

  Users working on the device of their choice, wherever they happen to be working, should have ready access to the same set of feature-rich voice and collaboration tools at all times. At a minimum, that set should include instant messaging, screen sharing, multi-party video, and complex call handling capabilities.

- **Superior communications quality, reliability and security**

  Communications of all kinds, especially those that depend on real-time interaction, need to deliver the highest levels of quality, reliability and security. You don’t want users exposing the organization to risk by turning to consumer-facing products because they’re convenient and easy to use. Your cloud solution should be just as convenient and easy, and should deliver security and a user experience of the highest quality possible.

- **TCO**

  A UCaaS solution that offers cost savings vs. on-premises solutions or using disparate cloud providers is essential to realizing the transformational promise of the cloud. A user- and usage-based subscription model helps you scale quickly to meet both employee and organization needs. It also provides a predictable cost structure over time, as deployments grow and organizations prosper.

- **Unified functionality**

  While some providers offer standalone web-conferencing or video solutions, optimizing the user experience and easing support burdens means finding a provider that can integrate UC functionality across applications with telephony, instant messaging, video, screen sharing and more. And make all of it easy to install and use.
The importance of the right UCaaS network

For optimal performance and reliability of your unified communications solution, it’s critical to have the right network connecting your locations and end-users to your UCaaS provider. The best providers will not deliver the best performance if the underlying network and Internet access connections are undersized or congested.

Look for a network solution that will provide the flexibility, visibility, control and priority capabilities to optimize application performance and provide superior reliability. And of course, there is always the great advantage offered by UCaaS providers who own and operate their own networks along with the solution. This provides for enhanced performance, reliability, and value, and dramatically simplifies management and customer support.

A software-defined wide area network (SD-WAN) is ideal for delivering a superior UCaaS solution and customer experience because it provides the infrastructure that an application such as UC (unified communications) requires. This starts with the ability for the organization to optimize performance of core, latency-sensitive UC functionalities such as voice and video, ensuring the delivery of a superior customer experience for all parties involved.

Conclusion

The rapid rise of remote working, technological advances and a demand for more cost-effective communications solutions with predictable expenses and greater control are driving the move to the cloud. UCaaS can improve your organization’s productivity, drive innovation and help you stay ahead of the competition. But choosing a network partner that can meet your needs, today and tomorrow, is critical to ongoing success.

Windstream Enterprise is a trusted name to add to your shortlist. We offer award-winning OfficeSuite UC®, a 100%-cloud-based UCaaS solution that includes a complete suite of voice, and collaboration features. It can be tailored to the unique needs of any organization, and can easily scale to 20,000 users. Additionally, OfficeSuite HD® Meeting offers powerful, yet easy to use video conferencing that is both highly reliable and highly secure. When combined, enterprises gain a powerful, integrated UC solution that can advance an organization’s digital transformation.

1. Deliver A Better Unified Communications Employee Experience With UCaaS And SD-WAN. Forrester, September 2018.