



Cloud-Based Contact Center Technology: 8 Critical Questions to Ask

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Cloud-Based Contact Center Technology: 8 Critical Questions to Ask

Getting the right cloud-based contact center solution hinges on these eight crucial criteria. Don't get stuck with an expensive solution that doesn't meet your needs or won't keep up with tomorrow's growth. Use this guide to do your due diligence in selecting the contact center software that's best for your organization's needs.

Executive Overview

If you're in the market for a new or expanded call center or contact center solution, you're likely to become the target of a barrage of sales pitches. You will hear catch phrases like "uptime and reliability," "100 percent web-based," "no software, no hardware," and many others. Careful evaluation of providers' claims will help ensure that your company is not trapped in a contact center solution that is not a good fit for your business.

In this white paper, we discuss eight critical criteria for choosing a cloud-based contact center solution.

For each consideration, we give you the questions to ask, and explain why getting good answers is important.

1. Software

Is your solution 100 percent web-based? Can all my call center agents and supervisors get access with just a phone, Internet connection and browser?

Only a 100 percent web-based system allows a company to standardize call center operations for any workspace environment. If you're using a traditional PBX—with wires and closets—you have much less flexibility, as well as a lot of management and upgrade problems.

A true cloud-based solution—provided over the Internet using an industrial-strength version of the technology behind voice-over-Internet phone service—reduces the complexity of implementation, eliminates maintenance and increases the usability of the system. Be aware that many vendors require that your contact center employees download, install and maintain a proprietary software component on their computers. Such solutions are not 100 percent web-based.

By the time you finish reading, you will

Learn to ask the right questions when speaking with potential contact center providers
Understand possible pitfalls and learn how to avoid them

Proprietary software makes you lose the ability to effectively employ home/ remote agents, a decrease in efficiency and an increase in maintenance costs. The requirement to install a local component forces the agent to go through all the steps they've completed initially to reconnect to the application if their PC fails.

While agents are engaged in reestablishing their access, your call center experiences a significant service interruption that negatively impacts your company's bottom line. A true cloud-based solution gives your contact center agents secure access to the system from any computer with a web browser. Your contact center never needs to experience any loss of productivity.

2. Hardware

Is there any specialized hardware required to enable the contact center application to function?

The requirement to purchase hardware puts a burden on your business. Setup of telephony routers, terminal adapters and on-premises servers can severely complicate implementation and support. Deployment of these additional hardware components could take days, and requires skill sets your business may not possess. (To fill the gap, you might need to purchase professional services from your vendor.)

Additionally, your vendor should not limit your call center to the use of specific phone equipment. Especially if you employ a distributed workforce, a robust solution should let your agents use any phone device—soft, mobile, office and home phone—without requiring you to purchase specialized gear. Remember that contact center vendors' requirement to purchase or lease hardware causes your contact center to lose portability and necessitates a significant upfront monetary investment and ongoing maintenance costs. It can also be less disaster-resilient.

To successfully adapt to changing business requirements, you (not your vendor) must be able to have control over your contact center. A provider's delay in responding to your request can seriously impact your business when changes need to be done quickly.

3. Compliance and Security

Which standards for compliance and security do you meet? Do you support HIPAA, FISMA, FIPS and PCI?

Increasingly, companies are coming under scrutiny for their security and compliance policies. Customers and even suppliers often reconsider whether they wish to continue patronizing a business that is perceived as being careless with customer data.

Missed opportunities are another potential business problem. For example, to do business with the US government or to be a subcontractor to a business that does, businesses need

to conform to such standards as FIPS, FISMA and others. 8x8 is the only VoIP provider that complies with both standards.

Other standards, such as the HIPAA medical privacy law, require compliance for any business that handles protected information. Very few communications providers offer HIPAA-compliant features, and fewer still offer critical documentation of their compliance to help you with yours. Federal HIPAA enforcement is expected to increase in the future, and you need to ascertain your contact center provider's level of compliance to avoid being subject to fines and penalties.

4. CRM Integration

Does your solution work with the CRM software we have? Is it pre-integrated, or will it require a significant professional services engagement to get it working?

Companies are increasingly turning to the cloud to handle a wide variety of functions, and your contact center provider's ability to work with your other infrastructure and business processes is critical.

Integration with customer relationship management software (CRM) is particularly important. That's because CRM solutions can furnish and collect important customer information.

When your CRM is integrated with your contact center software, agents can instantly see a customer's history because the data pops onto their screens.

Agents can use previous support issues, buying histories and other CRM data to make interactions more efficient, profitable, and customer-pleasing.

So whether you're using NetSuite, Salesforce, or Zendesk, it's important to find out whether a contact center solution comes pre-integrated with your CRM. Otherwise your company could be stuck doing lots of work to get the contact center to work with what you already have. Failure to do due diligence in this regard can ruin the return on your CRM investment.

There is also a benefit in getting contact center service that integrates well with your business phone systems.

As an example, the management team at Replicon—a cloud-based provider of time tracking applications—wanted to integrate the company's call center into the same communications platform that the rest of the company already uses for meetings, faxing, and phone communications. And, they wanted to keep customer communications a central focus for the company.

That's why Neal Alberda, Global IT Director, chose 8x8's Virtual Contact Center and Virtual Office, 8x8's business communications system with advanced call center management features that could be part of the company's overall strategy.

"We needed a comprehensive solution: phones, online meetings and call centers," explains Alberda. "8x8 is really the only hosted VoIP provider out there that can integrate a virtual call center into its service."

5. Workforce Optimization Software Integration

Other than CRM, what other software does your solution work with? Do you have ready-made integrations with problem-resolution software, quality management or workforce management solutions?

Increasingly, cloud solutions providers are adding functionality to contact centers to make them more efficient. For example, 8x8 offers options that add Teleopti's workforce management and/or Knoahsoft's quality monitoring and management software to its own Virtual Contact Center solution.

These services help contact center managers ensure that shifts are well staffed, even when needs change, and that calls are monitored and recorded in a way that yields hard data for call quality improvement initiatives. And, since these solutions are cloud-based and come pre-integrated with contact center solutions, you never need to install, integrate, maintain or update these solutions.

It's also becoming ever more important to understand and address problems with products and services. Integration with cloud services such as Zendesk's ticketing and customer-satisfaction software are vital to ensuring prompt correction of systemic issues and increasing customers' lifetime value to the businesses they patronize.

6. Maintenance

How do you handle planned maintenance? What kind of reliability standards do you meet?

While most providers will cover the "unplanned" downtime in their Service Level Agreement contract, the "planned" maintenances are typically not included. The truth is, however, that downtime – planned or unplanned – has a direct negative effect on your business and your customers. Make sure that your vendor has advanced technology such as 8x8's AVTA (Advanced Virtual Tenant Architecture) to provide world-class uptime and eliminate business interruptions during planned maintenances.

Contact center solutions that provide only a phone communication channel are placing you at a disadvantage against your competitors. Today's contact centers should be able to accept, route and prioritize chat and email interactions as well.

Companies that advertise real-world numbers include 8x8, which had 99.99% uptime in 2013, the last full year for which figures were available.

Beware of providers who try to convince you that frequent planned maintenance outages are a normal cost of running the service. This is usually an indication that the platform that they are using to provide cloud-based or on-demand services was not originally designed for this critical environment. The result is the need to repeatedly take down the service in a "planned" manner to avoid "unplanned" crashes, for which the provider has to reimburse your business. Needless to say, the typical uptime reports will not include "planned" maintenance service interruptions.

7. Changes to Call Center Configuration

Can I make changes to my setup on the fly, without contacting your support department?

To successfully adapt to changing business requirements, you—not your vendor—must be able to control your contact center. A provider's delay in responding to your request can seriously impact your business when changes need to be done quickly.

Creating prompts for new marketing campaigns, changing the phone device assigned to an agent, amending IVR flows, adjusting service levels across multiple communication channels—these are just a few functions that you should be able to handle on the fly, without contacting the solution provider.

Vendor involvement slows down your response to immediate business needs and complicates operational processes. A cloud-based contact center solution vendor should provide your call center with all tools necessary to manage the changes and updates independently.

8. Multi-channel Management

I'd like to provide multiple ways for my customers to reach me, such as phone, email, and web chat. Does your technology support the same routing rules, skills-based support and management and reporting across multiple types of media?

While phones remain a popular channel by which customers can reach companies, email and web chat are not far behind. Businesses that can make it easier for their customers to do business with them will gain an advantage over the competition. A robust cloud-based contact center solution should provide your business with an integrated multimedia management engine. Solutions that provide only a phone communication channel might be placing you at a disadvantage against competitors whose inbound communications include email and chat and who are therefore more accessible to their clients. Even if you start out using telephony only, you want to make sure that your provider can support multimedia interactions if you decide to open up those channels for your prospects and clients.

Additionally, keep in mind that a robust system should allow your contact center to manage all types of media using the same routing engine. Such integrated multi-channel management streamlines your contact center operations with agents being served the interaction at the appropriate time, whether it is a phone call, an email or a chat session. From the management perspective, an integrated solution should provide supervisors with a unified view of service level attainment across all communication channels.

Don't Take Silence As an Answer

Above all, don't make decisions based on incomplete, vague, or unacceptable answers. Contact Centers are playing increasingly central roles in businesses they serve. Make sure you get one that fits the way your organization does business.

Find out how 8x8 can help your business. Call: **1.866.862.2811** or visit **www.8x8.com**

