

Make a Match

Four Tips for Picking a VoIP Partner

When your business wants to gain the advantages of voice over IP (VoIP) and unified communications (UC) technology, where will you find the expertise to do it?

If you don't want to add technical staff or send yourself back to school, you'll need a reseller partner to provide the knowledge and services your company needs.

How do you choose a partner that's right for you? Four small businesses offer this advice:

1. Narrow your search

"There were several local candidates, but we wanted just one partner to outsource all our IT to," says Bruce Acton, president of the 10-employee [Acton Consulting](#). "We chose [Eneskay](#) because they're a single point of contact—they support Microsoft's cloud-based BPOS and are also Cisco certified."

The 125-employee [PBL Insurance](#) wanted a deep team for its four offices. "Instead of our having one or two IT people in-house try to manage all our technologies, we partnered with [Next Dimension, Inc.](#), which has over 20 technology specialists," says CFO Tim Fuerth. "They have all the areas of expertise we need, and someone is always available."

To find candidates to consider, dovetail your criteria with your peers' referrals and vendors' listings of authorized partners. "I used the [Cisco Partner Locator](#) because I trust that partners certified by Cisco are competent," says Haydn Mellowship, IT manager for [Airborne Energy Solutions](#), with more than 80 employees.

2. Meld minds

To evaluate candidates, apply best practices for hiring. And carefully consider requisites for a good long-term match:

- **Size it right.** "Don't go for a big marquee name, nor a small shop with limited resources," says Mellowship. "Make sure you're an important part of their business." Andrew Bouchat, director of business affairs at the 20-employee [Integrated Circle of Care](#), says, "Make sure the partner can adapt and grow with your business."
- **Share with candidates** your business's market, operations, and current technology, as well as your goals. Bouchat has developed a template document that includes all these elements "plus what we think we need."
- **Explore UC functionality** you may want beyond voice, such as wireless access or video, and integration with security, specific user devices, and applications such as customer relationship management (CRM). For example, PBL discovered that a Cisco Unified Communications 500 Series system could record and file customers' instructions to change their policies, reducing PBL's liability risk.

- **Understand the language.** "Make sure the partner speaks at your level of technical understanding, like Next Dimension does with me," says Bouchat.
- **Step into the ballpark** to discuss your budget and the partner's pricing. "We quickly saw that the Cisco UC system would save us money," says Acton. "And it turned out to pay for itself within one month—instead of incurring the expenses to replace a key employee when she moved 3,000 kilometers away, we used the system to give her secure remote access."

3. Put it in writing and align the team

When you're ready to partner, collaborate on the contract. Carefully consider the specific services (onsite and remote, and who may provide them), products, pricing, service-level requirements, response times, and the responsibilities that you each have. Scrutinize timelines.

"Businesses invest in new technology to save money and time; it's funny that deployment times tend to stretch out," says Bouchat. "To keep your project on schedule, plot all the decisions and tasks required. Then engage and line up everyone internally, particularly your decision makers."

4. Deploy, then keep connected

Well before deployment, the partner can preconfigure the equipment to your requirements and test it, as Enesky did for Airborne. The result: deployment took only six hours.

PBL Insurance retains its partner as a trusted adviser. "We meet with them biweekly to discuss our issues and plans, so they stay actively involved in our business," says Fuerth. "Their UC solution has already made PBL more flexible, saved us money, and let us create centers of expertise that improve customer service. Now we're looking at CRM integration. UC is the way of the future."

"Don't put UC off," advises Acton. "The cost savings and better quality of life that it gives employees—by letting them work from anywhere are huge benefits. Even in the financial contraction of a recession, UC is a small capital investment with a very good ROI."

Next Steps

- Learn about [Cisco Unified Communications solutions](#) and [3-year, 0% financing](#).
- See an overview of Cisco [partner certifications and specializations](#) and [find a local Cisco partner](#) that meets your specific needs.

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