

Guide to Building an Enterprise Unified Communications Strategy



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In this e-guide:

IT needs a unified communications strategy for voice/video conferencing, chat and other tools. This step-by-step guide helps you implement, evaluate and manage UC in the enterprise.

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Guide to building an enterprise unified communications strategy

Sandra Gittlen, Editor at Large, SearchUnifiedCommunications

Unified communications transformed in the past year from largely supporting on-site collaboration through huddle rooms, in-room conferencing, whiteboarding and the like to uniting largely remote workforces with audio and video conferencing, virtual whiteboards and more. Now another [unified communications](#) shift is underway -- the move to support hybrid in-office and at-home workforces. This guide, which includes links throughout to more information, explains why UC is more important than ever for businesses, its associated technologies and the steps it takes to create a comprehensive but agile unified communications plan for collaboration across the extended enterprise.

What is unified communications, and why is it important in business?

UC is a conceptual framework for integrating various enterprise communication methods -- including [telephony](#), video calling and conferencing, email, instant messaging and presence -- into a single platform, with the goal of streamlining and enhancing business communications, [collaboration](#) and productivity.

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UC deployment is less about rolling out a single technology and more about developing a strategy for how myriad [real-time communications](#) -- synchronous or with negligible latency -- and asynchronous tools help users collaborate and communicate in a productive manner that enhances organizational workflow.

Most companies should be able to clearly and easily identify the business needs that UC meets. TechTarget contributor Jon Arnold listed the [benefits of UC](#), including the following, that emphasize its importance and justify enterprise adoption:

1. improve existing processes;
2. boost employee productivity;
3. increase team-based productivity;
4. enhance organizational agility;
5. streamline IT operations; and
6. reduce costs.

UC applications and platforms [support the mobility](#) critical to next-generation business plans, with some being developed as mobile-first apps. At the very least, UC tools enable users to experience team collaboration in a similar manner across desktop and mobile devices, on the network and remotely.

Looking ahead, UC presents opportunities -- such as cloud-based services overtaking on-premises products ([unified communications as a service is taking off](#)), team collaboration becoming a hub of work, AI being incorporated to speed access to relevant information and to enable better communication, and the emergence of

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greatly improved security, governance and compliance. Also expect business processes to get a boost from analytics and enhanced workflows.

The evolution of unified communications

In the beginning, there were desk phones. Now, unified communications takes on many forms, including messaging, mobility and video conferencing. While various apps and endpoints are available, businesses need to ensure these tools are integrated with each other. Looking ahead, as unified communications continues to evolve, businesses need to be open to ongoing evolution.



Desk phones and telephony-centric tools formed the foundation of UC.



Over time, more advanced phone systems emerged, as did PCs and email.



The internet helped spawn other communication modes, including IM and video chat.



Mobile phones greatly expanded the communications landscape.



The rise of messaging and mobility presents new ways of working.



Communications platform as a service, or CPaaS, embeds communications into business apps.



Artificial intelligence and voice assistants could improve meeting workflows.

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UC features and technologies

UC is a blend of old and new technologies woven together to form the best voice, video, chat and whiteboarding experiences.

TechTarget editor Luke O'Neill listed nine [UC features that are most useful](#) to business:

1. high-quality audio;
2. video conferencing;
3. ease of use;
4. meeting transcription;
5. screen sharing;
6. messaging and chat;
7. mobility;
8. virtual backgrounds and video layouts;
9. noise suppression and muting; and
10. language translation.

5G wireless technology, expected to gain traction in the coming years, will [improve the UC user experience](#) compared to its predecessor, 4G LTE, as it enables faster speeds, lower latency and greater capacity for devices to simultaneously connect to the network and applications.

UC also will benefit from AI, which can [increase collaboration](#) and improve the quality of meeting results. [AI will drive collaboration with these features](#):

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1. noise suppression to prevent distractions and to help improve the accuracy of speech recognition applications;
2. real-time translation and real-time transcription to support a global employee base;
3. meeting summaries tailored to the needs of recipients; and
4. facial recognition to better secure meetings.

[AI-driven touchless devices](#), such as smart speakers, will be instrumental when employees return to the office. For instance, users will be able to use voice commands to start and end conference room or huddle room meetings. Voice biometrics, also driven by AI, can be used to authenticate permissions for UC technology as well. AI applications also can learn how team members work best together and then automatically map that information to optimize workflows. In [more advanced uses of AI](#), bots can be used to monitor calls and then pass around information, including documents, relevant to the conversation.

As users have become more adept at video calling and conferencing, their appetite for the technology has increased, including a desire for live video editing, which includes the ability to change backgrounds and launch special effects and other camera tricks. They also expect to consume information, such as what was once in a user manual, via short, engaging videos. Vendors have taken note of these [video conferencing trends](#) and are incorporating them into their products and services.

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Most useful unified communications features for businesses

When assessing unified communications platforms and meeting applications, organizations should divvy up their desired features into must-have and nice-to-have categories.

● MUST-HAVE UC FEATURES ● NICE-TO-HAVE UC FEATURES

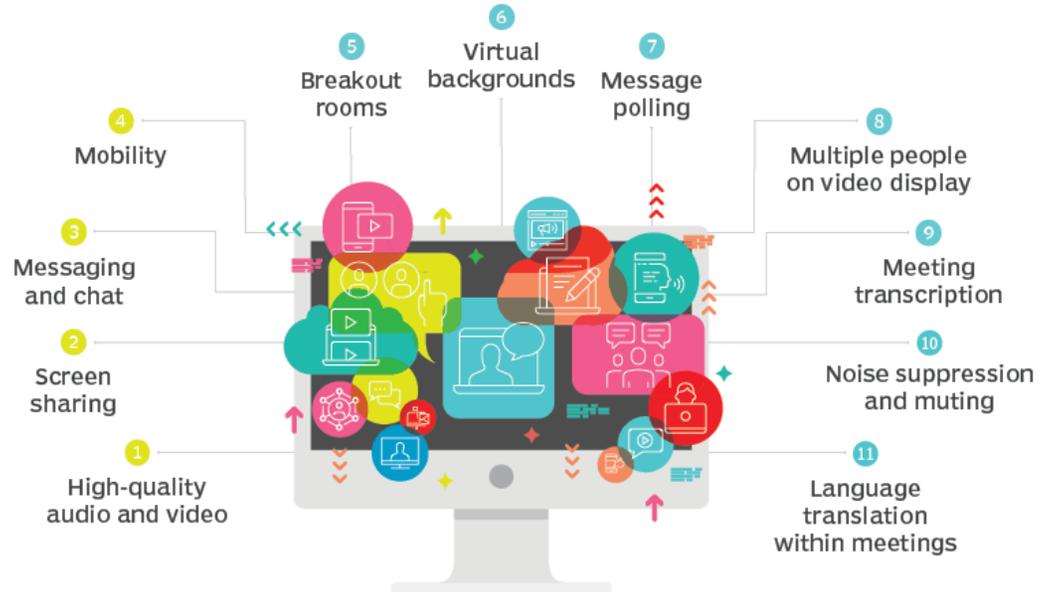


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How to build a strategy for enterprise UC

Building a strategy for enterprise UC requires organizations to think through how their employees like to communicate with one another as well as with external partners. Companies should make sure that preferred workflow is a top consideration as they assemble their plans for UC, blending voice, video, chat and messaging for a fulsome user experience.

Below are eight steps that will help IT teams and business leaders create a strategy for enterprise UC.

Step 1. Evaluate UC needs

UC needs can range from department-level usage to a full companywide rollout. IT should be involved with all UC projects from the start, as they tend to grow quickly once employees get used to the tools and want to extend them beyond their own teams.

The move to remote work and home offices affects UC cost calculations. "Whereas UC is a nice-to-have at the office, it is a need-to-have at home and will truly become the hub for productivity for home-based workers," TechTarget contributor Arnold wrote. Subscription costs and endpoints are [important areas for UC evaluation](#), he added, and

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encouraged IT to get involved in and possibly manage procurement of users' application and device or peripheral buying decisions.

Some more dramatic changes, such as [shifting to a meeting platform](#) from direct voice calls or voice-only audio conferencing, could save companies millions of dollars annually, according to Irwin Lazar and John Burke, both of Nemertes Research.

Although employees might start returning to the office at some point post-pandemic, many experts believe video calling and conferencing will still be the [predominant meeting platform](#) compared to gathering in conference rooms or smaller meeting spaces. Therefore, companies must be prepared with a video conferencing strategy that can satisfy a blend of user preferences.

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10 benefits of unified communications

 <p>Improve existing processes</p> <p>UC tools can be used concurrently and interchangeably to enable improved collaboration. The user experience is consistent across endpoints, locations and networks.</p>	 <p>Employee productivity</p> <p>Users spend less time managing communications and can choose the best form of communication for the task at hand. Employees work more effectively in office and remote locations.</p>	 <p>Team productivity</p> <p>Features like team chat and file sharing along with meeting capabilities enable more effective communications between teams, regardless of location or time zone.</p>	 <p>Strengthen IT security</p> <p>IT can more easily standardize security policies and manage tasks like security patches and compliance updates.</p>	 <p>Connect remote employees</p> <p>Remote workers can connect and collaborate more with a consistent set of tools and applications.</p>
 <p>Organizational agility</p> <p>Streamlined communications and support for mobile and remote work enable organizations to quickly address changing business and market needs.</p>	 <p>Improved IT operations</p> <p>Standardizing on a UC platform simplifies IT management and support for both the network and end users.</p>	 <p>Cost reduction</p> <p>Organizations can lower communications costs by consolidating overlapping services, reducing IT overhead and reducing travel.</p>	 <p>Improve customer service</p> <p>Contact centers can more easily connect customers to necessary resources with just a single call, offering a better customer experience.</p>	 <p>Increase efficiency with AI</p> <p>AI enhanced UC capabilities with automation-related features that free up workers for more in-depth work.</p>

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Step 2. Identify potential challenges

As organizations begin to [make the business case for unified communications](#), they should also reflect on UC's challenges. For instance, are there good reasons to keep existing phones systems, and will doing so cut into any cost savings UC would offer? Also, is the staff skilled enough to manage a UC deployment, or would external help be needed?

Another consideration is the legacy environment UC will be coming into in terms of applications, devices and connectivity. Will a new UC platform or service be able to interoperate well with the current infrastructure, especially if it connects to the cloud? If the need driving the company's move to UC is support for remote workers, will other aspects of the environment, such as servers and bandwidth, be able to support the increased demand?

Organizations should [identify these shortcomings](#) and study them with a critical eye before committing to a migration to UC.

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Step 3. Choose between on-premises or as-a-service UC products

One of the most important decisions an organization will make when it comes to unified communications is whether to deploy it on premises or in the cloud as a service.

Going with a traditional hardware approach of [comparing total cost of ownership would be a mistake](#), however, because UC is considered Capex, and [UC as a service](#) is considered Opex. Instead, look at the features required for the business as well the IT team's skill level to determine if on premises, in the cloud or a hybrid is the best approach.

For example, cloud UC vendors tend to offer more cutting-edge options -- such as video calling, chat, contact centers, reporting and analytics, and mobility. Traditional PBX-based UC platforms often struggle to support this array of features.

Organizations shouldn't assume that cloud UC will be less expensive than on-premises UC. The average operational expenses for [cloud services are more costly than on-premises systems](#), according to Nemertes Research. Companies with fewer than 1,000 licenses that have been using cloud services for a few years are the exception -- their operational costs have declined. The upshot is that the cost of using the cloud decreases over time and with experience.

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A deciding factor in opting for an on-premises solution is the availability of reliable, low-latency and low-jitter WAN connections or high-speed internet. If neither exist, then IT will need the [control that on-premises solutions provide](#).

One way to get the benefits of an on-premises solution without dedicating staff to the effort is to [deploy managed UC services](#). In addition to reducing IT management and maintenance, managed UC services can boost end-user productivity. They help do the following:

1. support mobile workforces;
2. expand contact center remote connectivity;
3. consolidate UC service management; and
4. take advantage of public cloud benefits.

Companies that want to approach the cloud in stages also can utilize a hybrid UC strategy where certain features -- those core to the business -- stay in an on-premises platform, and others are relegated to services in the cloud. Trying to balance between the two is fine in the short term, but over the long haul, IT will likely have to firmly plant itself fully on premises or fully in the cloud.

Organizations also will have to decide if they want to procure all of their UC functionality from a single vendor or buy from multiple providers. While sticking with a single UC vendor can reduce costs, simplify management and create a more consistent user experience, better and broader functionality might be available from separate providers.

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Explore this [comprehensive list of UC platform vendors](#), as well as product details, including collaboration and communications features.

UC deployment points to consider

ON PREMISES	CLOUD	HYBRID
<p>Enterprise retains full infrastructure control</p> <p>More telephone services and pricing flexibility</p> <p>New apps may require expensive, upfront capital expenditures and more administrator support</p>	<p>Better WAN, internet connectivity lets IT migrate apps and data into the cloud</p> <p>Service providers manage underlying infrastructure and server upgrades</p> <p>Applications are centrally located in a public-facing cloud so remote users can easily access UC services</p> <p>Can't guarantee low latency, high throughput and redundancy components for geographically dispersed enterprises</p>	<p>Keep critical parts of UC environment on premises while moving others to the cloud</p> <p>Uses on-premises UC capital expenditure while moving less latency-sensitive services to the cloud</p> <p>Enterprises have to decide how to support new UC apps and technologies—through capital expenditure or cloud services</p>

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Step 4. Choose a team collaboration tool

Collaboration tools came out of the gate strong in 2020, especially as users were forced to embrace working from home. Only 22% of remote workers surveyed by Dice.com said they "always" would prefer to work remotely. Choosing a tool that jives with an organization's culture and workflow isn't easy, though. Collaboration platforms take on the identity of the users, enabling employees to create channels to share information; connect with each other over audio, video or chat; and to track conversations (and related information) for compliance and reference. For some, the collaboration platform becomes the hub of work and workflow.

As such, head-to-head comparisons are useful to learn about features and functions, limitations, ease of use, ability to interoperate with other applications and systems in the enterprise, security and compliance, and pricing.

Here is a comparison of Microsoft Teams vs. Zoom and a comparison of Webex Teams vs. Microsoft Teams.

We've also compiled a detailed comparison of cloud-based video conferencing tools. The industry is evolving quickly, so our chart helps you learn the notable features to look for as well as each tool's integration capabilities.

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Compare Microsoft Teams vs. Zoom features and capabilities

	Microsoft Teams	Zoom
UNIQUE FEATURES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Comes bundled with Office 365 ■ Office 365-based collaboration ■ Unique integrations with other Office apps ■ Native Active Directory integration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Simultaneous screen sharing ■ Mobile app enables users to schedule, start or join a meeting ■ View up to 48 simultaneous video streams ■ Use video display hardware as digital signage when not in use
SECURITY FEATURES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Offers wide range of authentication protocols ■ Advanced encryption control through Active Directory advanced auditing and reporting ■ Advanced Threat Protection for document security 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Flexible role-based security ■ End-to-end application-layer encryption ■ Single sign-on support via SAML and OAuth
OSes SUPPORTED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Windows, macOS, Linux, Android, iOS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Windows, macOS, Linux, Android, iOS
HARDWARE CHOICES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Support for proprietary and select third-party devices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Support for proprietary and select third-party devices
SUPPORT PROVIDED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Video conference support options depend on the Office 365 plan purchased. This includes self-help guides, web/email support and technical phone support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ All paid plans include online trouble ticket creation, live chat support and dedicated phone support.
PRICING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Free version for basic chat and meetings capabilities ■ Microsoft 365 Business Basic: \$5/user/month ■ Microsoft 365 Business Standard: \$12.50/user/month ■ Office 365 E3: \$20/user/month ■ Microsoft 365 E5: \$57/user/month 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Free version with certain limitations ■ Pro plan: \$14.99/host/month ■ Business plan: \$19.99/host/month ■ Enterprise plan: \$19.99/host/month
MEETINGS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Meeting capabilities include screen sharing, whiteboarding, virtual backgrounds, content sharing ■ Supports up to 10,000 participants (live events) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Meeting capabilities include simultaneous screen sharing, virtual backgrounds, calendar integrations ■ Supports up to 1,000 participants with a large meeting license
TELEPHONY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Phone System enables call control and PBX capabilities in the cloud with Microsoft Teams. Direct Routing connects Phone System to on-premises telephony infrastructure. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Zoom Phone offers a cloud PBX with native PSTN capabilities in 40+ countries. There is also the option to connect to a third-party PSTN provider if needed. Audio video conferencing users can dial in to meetings via VoIP or PSTN.

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Step 5. Address unified communications security

As UC becomes essential to the business, IT should prioritize the security of the platform, whether it is on premises or in the cloud.

Kevin Tolly, founder of The Tolly Group, outlined some [common UC security issues](#):

1. theft of service;
2. denial of service;
3. hacking tools;
4. mobile threats; and
5. unauthorized access.

Properly configuring the UC system enables an organization to balance the twin concerns of security and ease of use. The core of an organization's UC security plan, Tolly emphasized, should center around selecting those security options that provide the best protection without interfering with the UC user experience.

Securing video conferencing is a challenge as well. Two vulnerability risks reside in every platform: a backdoor in the algorithm that can be exploited and how the platform is implemented (a missed security check by developers or a bad implementation decision can wreak havoc).

TechTarget contributor Tsahi Levent-Levi explained [video conferencing's primary security concerns](#), including the need for encryption in transit and at rest, as well as policies for security updates and how to avoid compromising security for usability.

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5 potential UC security threats

Denial of service	Theft of service	Hacking tools	Mobile threats	Unauthorized access
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DoS attacks come in several varieties, including call flooding, message flooding and disruptive signaling. Traditionally, DoS attacks target VoIP systems but can also target websites and mobile apps that use WebRTC or CPaaS. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The communications system is hacked and used to make scam or illegal calls. Toll fraud is the most common theft of service, where an attacker uses a phone system to make expensive unauthorized calls. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tools, such as SIPVicious, can be used from inside or outside the network to maliciously compromise the UC or VoIP system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unsecured end-user devices can open the corporate network to threats. Mobile UC apps on unsecured or public networks can leave data and user information at risk. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> UC apps like video conferencing are at risk if they aren't secured with passwords, access codes or two-factor authentication. Zoombombing is a prominent example where uninvited users interrupt and take over meetings held on Zoom.
				

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Step 6. Implement and integrate UC

UC implementation revolves around the capabilities of applications and their ability to integrate with other components of the enterprise. This certainly becomes **trickier in a WFH setting** because users need to be able to access their UC tools as well as back-end systems, such as file servers and storage, in a seamless manner. The more systems that live in the cloud, the easier this tends to be.

For example, many people have given up their landlines at home but don't always have reliable cell service. For companies to assure proper access to voice calls, they might have to provide users with softphone clients that can tie directly into the company's telephony system and have the same functionality as a desk phone.

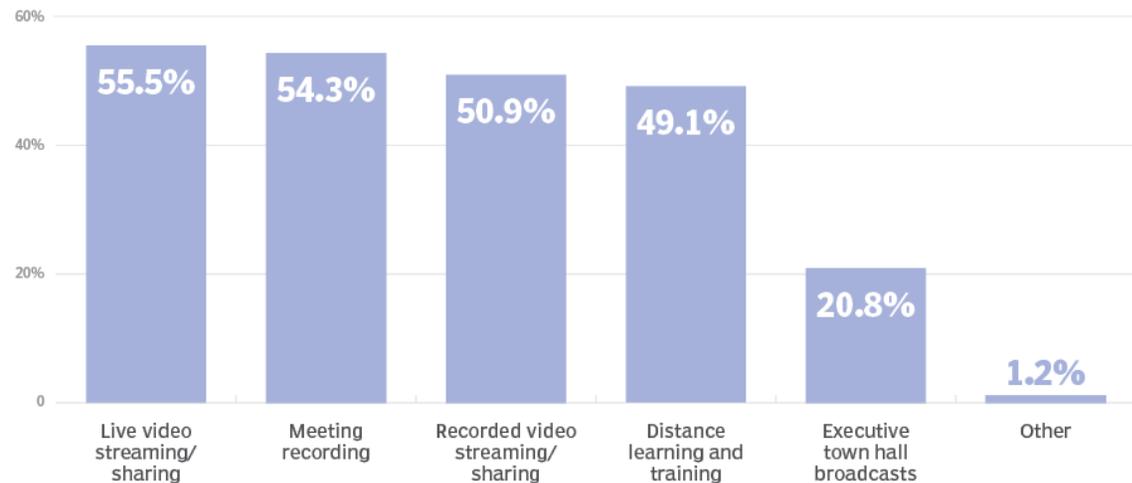
TechTarget contributor Reda Chouffani shared how a **Microsoft Teams implementation supports remote work**:

1. near real-time messaging and resource sharing for emergency communications;
2. access to electronic files -- uploads, downloads and sharing;
3. the ability to use a computer or a smartphone as a desk phone;
4. the ability to host and attend virtual meetings; and
5. safeguards to ensure communication and data are protected.

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Use cases driving video content management adoption



SOURCE: NEMERTES RESEARCH

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Step 7. Manage UC

To [properly manage UC](#), companies need insight into performance and security and the ability to optimize provisioning and ongoing administrative management, according to Nemertes' Lazar. Vendor-provided management tools don't always have these capabilities and often suffer from a lack of interoperability with other critical applications, such as those used for HR.

[Cloud-based service-level agreements for UC services](#) ensure service providers meet performance and availability metrics as well as uphold security standards. Reading the fine print on service-level agreements prevents an organization from being exposed to undue risk.

Managing UC is often a day-to-day experience where IT teams must keep up with the latest industry information. TechTarget editors have assembled a list of [UC blogs to follow](#) to stay up to date on product announcements, feature spotlights, changes to vendor roadmaps and more.

IT leaders must continue to [future-proof their UC strategy](#) so they don't miss out on opportunities for innovation. TechTarget contributor Arnold recommended following three best practices:

1. ensure vendors can support all the UC deployment models;
2. proactively drive end-user adoption; and

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3. assess worker needs and preferences for collaboration.

Step 8. Train employees on UC

Getting the most from a UC deployment, including conferencing, chat and collaboration tools, requires users to be well trained on the features that optimize workflow and the [compliance rules](#) they must follow.

Creating a cheat sheet of tips and tricks for the organization's UC platform will help improve adoption rates and ensure users can fully engage with the application. For instance, team members can use the "To Dos" tab in Teams to track all the action items assigned to them during meetings. Highly regulated industries, including healthcare and finance, can implement compliance measures within the platform to protect sensitive corporate information and keep employee and customer data from leaking out. Check out [eight useful tips for Microsoft Teams](#), such as teaching users how to connect to external users in a safe and compliant manner.

Help your users [ace a video conference interview](#) with these helpful tips.

To ensure maximum user engagement, organizations can [create a formal UC adoption program](#). The program should enable employees to customize their collaboration workflows -- an effort the company's UC vendor or service provider should be able to help with or lead.

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A successful UC strategy should result in positive experiences for employees and customers. Failing to properly train users will prevent an organization from extracting the most value from its UC investment.

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About SearchUnifiedCommunications

SearchUnifiedCommunications.com provides IT professionals with vendor-independent news, advice, product evaluation, educational tools and a sense of community that will help them to evaluate technologies, make strategic decisions and implement, manage and secure their voice communications in a reliable and cost-effective manner.

With our exclusive focus for IT and networking professionals, we provide a reliable source of how-to tips and best practices for implementing, managing and securing VoIP and advanced UC applications, enabling IT professionals to take advantage of the cost savings and new features and benefits associated with converged enterprise network.

For further reading, visit us at:
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