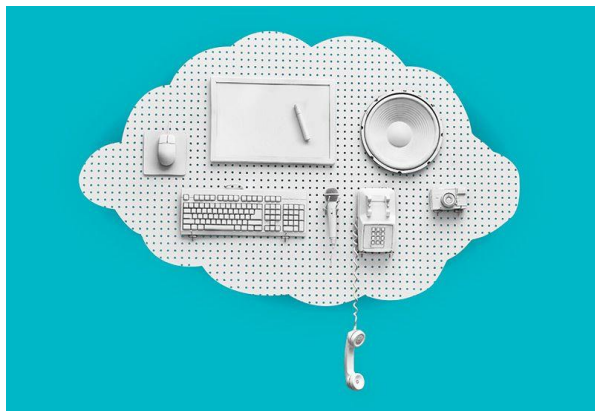


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## How “unified communications” helps small businesses get more done.



*How one growing firm improved customer service (and staff morale!) by picking a cloud communications tool people actually like to use*

Jul 7, 2016 [Sarah Niedoba](#)

This time last year, things were going well for [QuickContractors.com](#)—very well. The Guelph, Ont., company, which connects retailers with contractors willing to deliver and assemble products for their customers, was in the middle of a blistering growth spurt. In a little over a decade, it had expanded from a scrappy upstart into a thriving outfit with dozens of employees, a database of 1,500 contractors and such industry giants as Lowe’s, Home Depot and Canadian Tire as clients. From 2009 to 2014, its sales increased by 4,184%.

For a business built on fast and efficient service, this success created some logistical problems—especially on the communications front. “We had inquiries coming in from our contractors and our retailers, and we had information coming in from Twitter, Facebook and Instagram,” explains Trevor Bouchard, the company’s president and CEO. “Our business has a multitude of touch points—we have a software component; we have to co-ordinate contractors; we have invoices and accounting—and we were

trying to reconcile all of that with different systems.” With diverse types of messages (complaints, requests, updates) coming in and going out via different platforms (phone, email, social media posts, live chats), it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep track of who was saying what and to whom. “We had people answering live chats while answering the phones,” Bouchard recalls. “It wasn’t an effective way to handle our communications. That’s when I realized, ‘OK, we need to start unifying these different channels into one.’”

Enter unified communications, or UC. Bouchard had heard the term being tossed around, and the more he learned, the more curious he became. In basic terms, UC refers to the integration of workplace communication tools. Solutions range from a [simple video-conferencing client](#) built onto a [core telephony platform](#) to more complex offerings that integrate instant messaging and file sharing. Many provide a single interface that can be [used across multiple devices to receive and share information](#). It’s all intended to facilitate better communication, without the fuss and guesswork.

If this seems a bit confusing to you, you’re not alone. It’s extremely common for people considering UC to get overwhelmed, according to Simon Dudley, CEO of Austin, Texas, consultancy Excession Events and a frequent contributor to the industry website UCStrategies.com. “A wide range of products fall under the UC banner,” he says, “and some are easier to use than others.” The best way to start, Dudley says, is to evaluate and rank which features matter most in improving communication.

That was Bouchard’s approach. After Googling UC implementations and asking around at industry events, he had plenty of information but no clear idea about how to proceed. So he put some thought into what would make UC successful at his business. Given the volume and variety of employees who would be using a UC platform at QuickContractors, he realized it was paramount to choose an option with an intuitive interface. “I thought if I could figure it out—and I don’t have formal technical training—it would be fairly intuitive for the rest of our staff, the ones actually using it.”

So it was with ease of use in mind that Bouchard started testing options. He signed up for several platforms from vendors offering 30-day free trials and spent some time “playing around.” This gave him a no-strings way to experience, in very practical

terms, how each system might really work within his company and to assess whether people would actually use it.

This hands-on experimenting led Bouchard—who urges anyone considering UC to take advantage of these trials—to a cloud-based UC platform from California vendor [Zendesk](#), which QuickContractors adopted late last year. Bouchard loved the ease with which the platform integrated with the company's existing VOIP technology and the “Google-esque” (read: simple to use) interface. “It only takes 15 minutes for users to grasp the basics,” he explains.

User interface might seem a superficial criterion for such complex technological integrations, but Dudley asserts that simplicity and ease of use are huge factors in successful UC launches. “People hate change,” he explains. “If it doesn't benefit their life in a way they can understand, they will simply go back to what they've done before. You want something your employees are actually going to use.”

Bouchard is confident a user-friendly interface has been essential in introducing employees to UC. While some staff were initially skeptical, over the past six months, he says, “basically everyone” at QuickContractors has embraced the technology. In fact, as the longer-term benefits of UC become more apparent, it's helping to engage employees with their work in several ways. For instance, before the implementation, workers had no meaningful way to measure the efficacy of their communications. “Now they're able to see real-time stats about how they're performing on a daily, hourly and weekly basis,” explains Bouchard. “They feel more confident standing behind those scores, and they're able to really take a larger view of things.”

While it's still too early to measure savings—especially since QuickContractors is now paying for technology it wasn't a year ago—Bouchard says UC has already improved the way the company manages client interactions, which he expects to yield returns in the future. Moreover, he no longer worries about inquiries getting mishandled or, worse, missed: “We're now routing everything much more efficiently,” he says. “And that is a great advantage.”