

Choosing the Right Headset for Business Use: *Cost and Performance Matters*



F R O S T  S U L L I V A N

A Frost & Sullivan White Paper

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INTRODUCTION

As companies continue to embrace soft phones, conferencing services and unified communications clients, they are recognizing the value in deploying headsets to all their end users – not just contact center agents and high-level managers and executives. Knowledge workers at all levels of the organization can reap the benefits of headset use, and then some: better audio and voice quality, crisper communications, hands-free meeting participation and improved productivity. That, in turn, helps their employers see better ROI not just from their headset investment, but from all their communications and collaboration applications.

Indeed, Frost & Sullivan research shows that more businesses are adopting headsets to accompany the growth of PC-based communications. We expect the number of UC headsets purchased for office use to grow at a CAGR of 23.1% from 2013 to 2020. A large reason for that bump: the installed base of activated PC communication clients is expected to more than triple over the next five years, and the employees using that new technology will need headsets to get the most out of their UCC applications.

As the need for headsets penetrates organizations, reaching employees at all levels of the business, companies must pay attention to the cost of the new peripherals they deploy. Pricing pressures are among the top three concerns for decision-makers when they consider headset purchases. But even as headset prices are decreasing, some buyers have found that bargain headsets don't deliver the quality they expect and their users demand. The consequences of such poor performance can be stark: when audio and voice quality suffer, employees stop using the UC tools as they are supposed to – and their employers don't see the promised benefits and ROI of the new technology.

This paper will outline the trends in headset use for businesses today and into the future; discuss the benefits headsets provide, especially as more employees rely on PC-based communications; offer insight into the pitfalls of using a low-quality device; and deliver best practices for ensuring that even small headset investments deliver maximum bang for the buck.

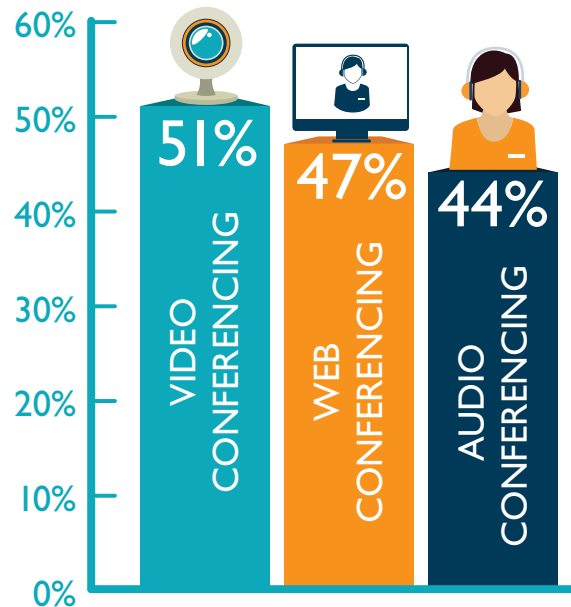
COLLABORATION DRIVES MODERN BUSINESS

Clearly, companies have embraced the idea of supporting a remote and virtual workplace, allowing employees to work in ways that drive productivity and increase the bottom line. A recent Frost & Sullivan survey of more than 1,000 IT decision-makers in the US and Europe reveals that, on average, more than one-third of employees routinely work either remotely or from the road.



Source: Frost & Sullivan

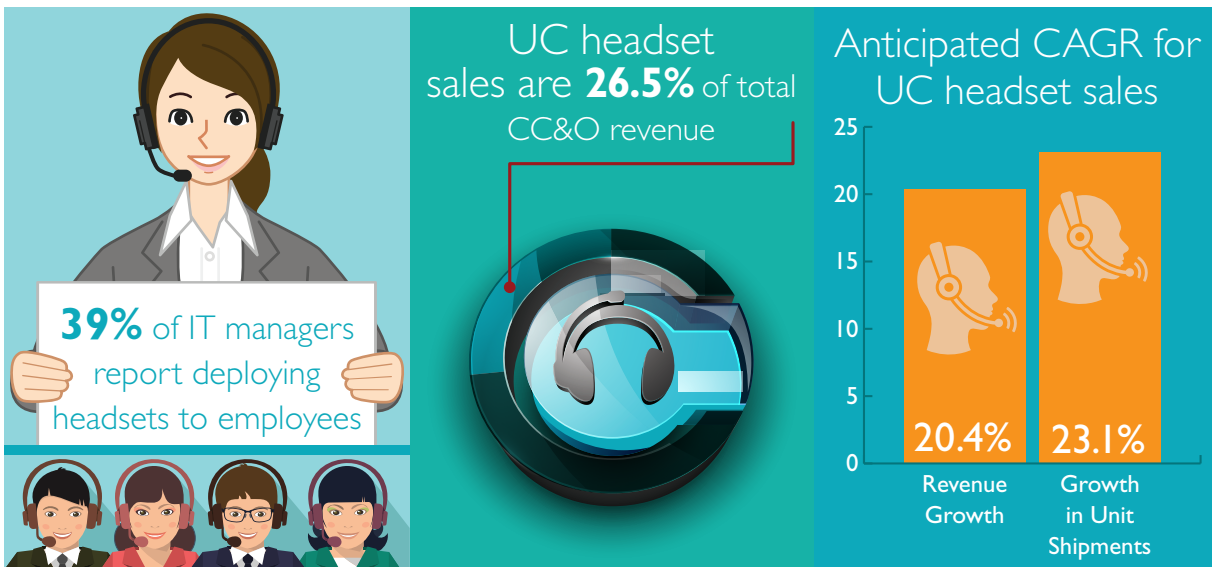
As a result of this shift, businesses of all sizes have embraced unified communications, including Voice over IP (VoIP) and audio, video and web conferencing; these tools allow employees to communicate and collaborate with their colleagues, suppliers and customers from anywhere and on any device, at low cost, and with ease. Today, more than half of all businesses in the US and Europe deploy video conferencing, 47% use web conferencing, and 44% use stand-alone audio conferencing (i.e., not as part of a larger video or web event).



Source: Frost & Sullivan

These advanced forms of communications and collaboration – combined with the new reality of the workplace, in which employees regularly work from “public” spaces such as open offices, kitchen tables, airport gate areas and hotel lounges – are dramatically improved when used in conjunction with headsets, which minimize disruption, heighten voice and audio fidelity, and improve overall productivity and efficiency.

As businesses increasingly acknowledge the key benefits that headsets bring to both end users and IT departments in a new software-based communications environment, they are deploying them to more of their employees. Whereas headsets were once offered only to contact center agents, executives and administrative staff, today’s knowledge workers expect – and often receive – the technology in order to work more productively and effectively. Today, 39% of IT managers report deploying headsets to employees, and UC headset sales represent 26.5% of total Contact Center & Office (CC&O) headset revenue. They are expected to continue to grow at a CAGR of 23.1% in terms of unit shipments and 20.4% in terms of revenue over the next several years.



Source: Frost & Sullivan

HEADSETS ARE CRITICAL FOR THE NEW WORKPLACE

Today's knowledge workers operate under very different conditions than they did even just a few years ago. At the same time, the number of combined audio, video and web conferences employees are participating in is on the rise. Companies are deploying UC technologies at a rapid pace; Frost & Sullivan's research shows that these are among the most-used communications and collaboration tools in the enterprise today. These applications make it easy and cost-effective to connect employees, partners and customers around the globe, regardless of where they are located and without the need for costly and time-consuming travel.

More and more, employees are using these services from their desktops, rather than large conference rooms or private, enclosed offices. Since all virtual meetings involve audio, this new way of working puts pressure on businesses to ensure their employees are as effective as possible on their web, video and audio calls. Being able to hear other participants is table stakes; ideally, the quality should make the experience as good as it would be if everyone was sitting together in a quiet room. The speaker's voice quality matters, too – meeting participants want to be heard by other attendees, regardless of what else might be going on around them. That involves delivering not just hi-fidelity audio, but also eliminating the background noise that comes from working in an open office or public space.

Headsets also free up the user's hands, since one is no longer tethered to a desk phone. This is critically important during web conferences, in which typing within the conference environment is often an integral part of the experience (as participants mark up documents, type in questions, and engage in sidebar chats). It's also valuable on video calls, allowing people to show others what's being discussed, and in audio-only calls, by making it easier for callers to multi-task, search for documents, and call up data while they're on the phone.



Cordless headsets continue to penetrate offices and are estimated to represent more than 30% of total office headset shipments in 2013. These slightly costlier devices free up users to move around the office while participating in conference calls, allowing them to multi-task and interact with people and information.

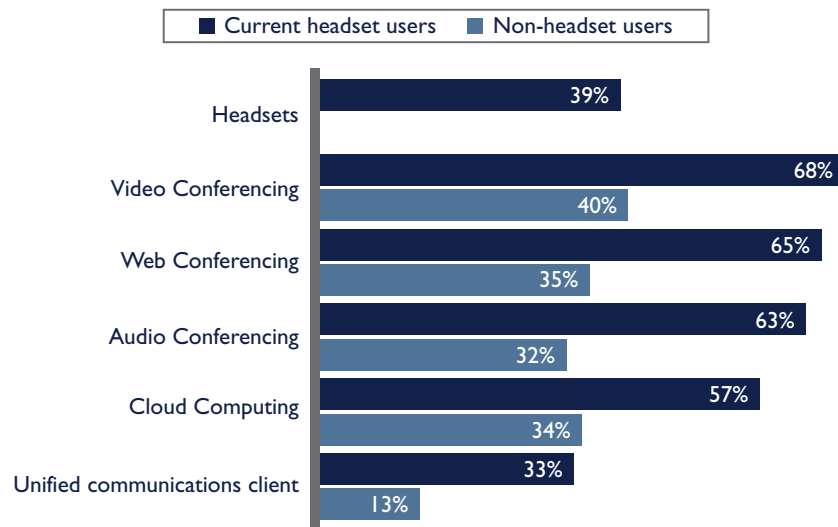


Furthermore, headsets offer ergonomic benefits. Cradling a telephone handset with one's neck and head has never been comfortable, and this is even more true today: as people integrate web and video capabilities, and as they spend more time working with remote colleagues and customers, they are spending more time on interactive phone calls. Headsets help these users make their meetings as productive as they can be.

Finally, Frost & Sullivan research shows that headset users also take advantage of UCC tools far more often than those who don't use headsets: 68% of headset users use video conferencing (compared with 40% of people who don't use headsets); 65% use web conferencing (compared with 35%); 63% use audio conferencing (compared with 32%); 57% use cloud computing (compared with 34%); and 33% use UC clients (compared with an anemic 13%).

Figure 1 - Enterprise Technologies, Total Sample Versus Headset User

Currently, 39% of IT decision-makers use headsets, and these headset users utilize other enterprise technologies at statistically higher rates than those who do not use headsets.



Source: Frost & Sullivan

Companies that deploy headsets along with their UC applications will likely see a much better return on investment (ROI) from both the devices and the applications, and their employees will reap the benefits of UC on a much more regular and effective basis.

LOW-COST HEADSETS SHOULD DELIVER ENTERPRISE-QUALITY EXPERIENCE

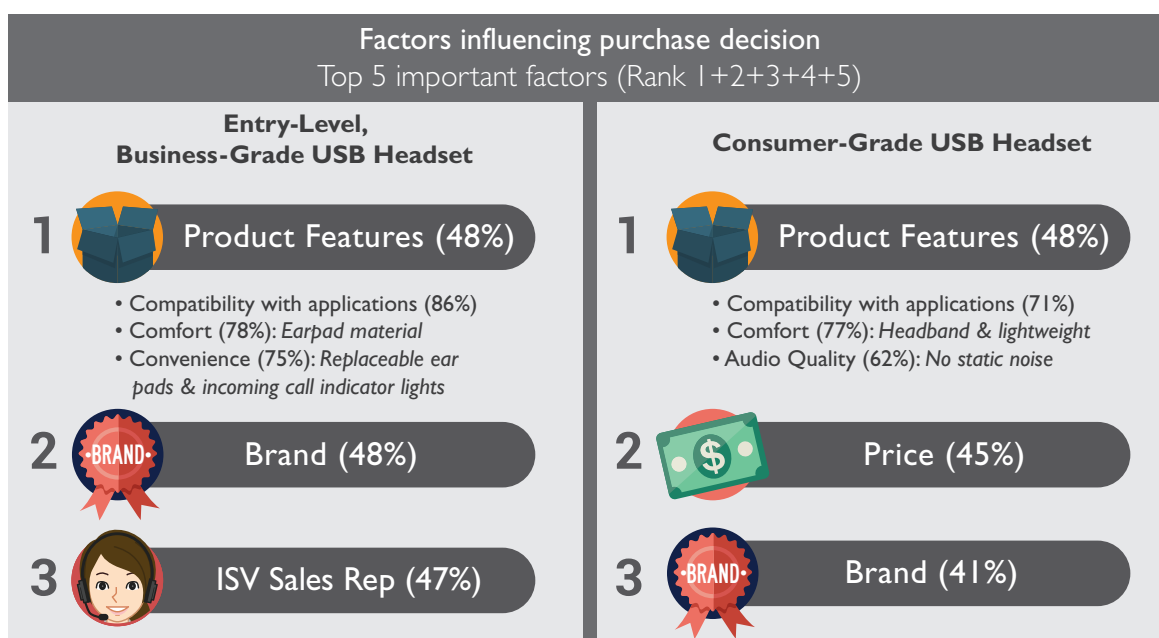
The growing adoption of UC- and PC-based communications continues to transform the headset from a “nice-to-have” to a critical part of any knowledge worker’s toolbox. But as more companies look to deploy headsets to a larger user base, they must pay attention to cost. While high-end devices are appropriate for certain users – contact center agents and busy office administrators among them – most knowledge workers need an entry-level solution that allows them to focus on one thing: the details of the call they are on, rather than the capabilities of the headset device.

Too often, however, IT and business managers don’t pay enough attention to the quality of the headsets they buy for a wide audience. Price matters, but so does performance. At the entry level, bells and whistles should take a back seat to quality and fidelity. Furthermore, low-cost headsets should be sturdy enough to stand up to repeated use, easy enough to operate without an instruction manual, and comfortable enough to allow employees to wear them all day long.

If a headset doesn’t do what it’s supposed to – deliver crisp, clear audio while eliminating distracting background noise and maintaining a comfortable working environment—people won’t use it. And if they don’t use headsets, not only will the investment in the devices go unrealized, so will the investment in the UCC apps and services the devices are meant to support and elevate.

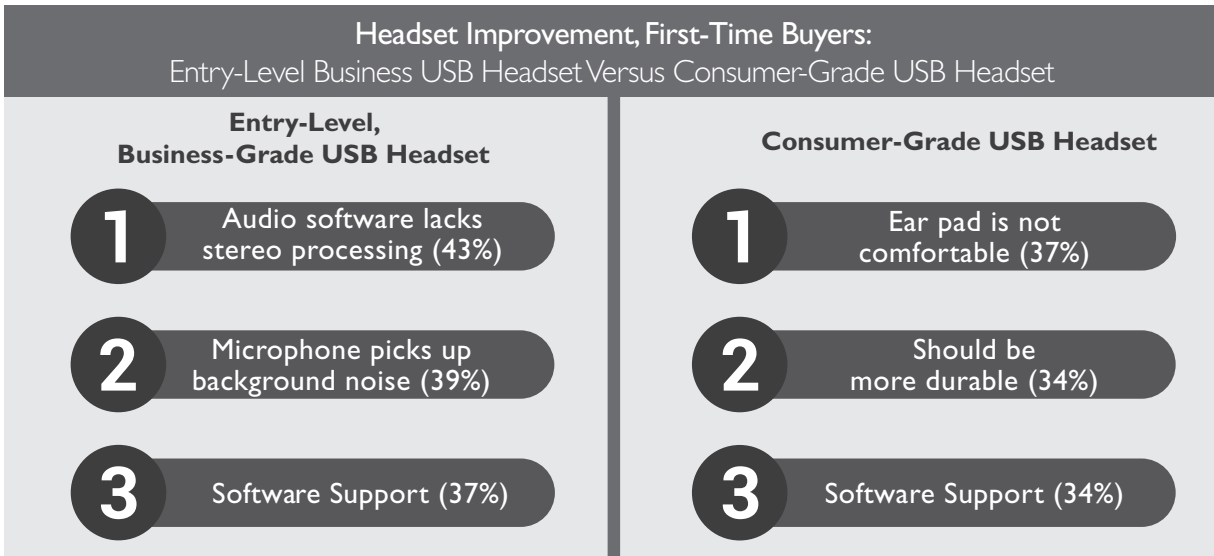
Recent research conducted by headset manufacturer Logitech shows the discrepancy between usage and expectations for consumer-grade USB headsets deployed in a business environment. Many consumer-grade headsets are not built for the typical all-day usage that professional communicators require, and they don’t offer the advanced features that make the UC experience more seamless, such as call answer/hang-up and DSP professional audio. In fact, the study shows that while “comfort” is one of the key features consumer-grade headset purchasers look for, it is not one of the main benefits they receive. The research also shows that another top criterion, durability, doesn’t meet expectations, further demonstrating that price shouldn’t be the driving factor in headset choice. Businesses that look for the cheapest device should be aware that they may be sacrificing critical features, which can lead to a decrease in usage and the need for faster replacement.

Figure 2 - Headset Purchase Criteria



Source: Logitech

Figure 3 - Headset Improvement, First-Time Buyers: Entry-Level Business USB Headset Versus Consumer-Grade USB Headset



Source: Logitech

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A HEADSET FOR ALL

- UC platforms certification and optimization
- Comfort
- High-quality audio input and output
- Sturdy construction
- Ease of use
- Strong vendor heritage
- Low price point
- In-line controls

When purchasing headsets for a large number of knowledge workers, turning to a vendor with a long track record in the headset market is better than going with a low-end manufacturer. An enterprise-class vendor will offer affordable options that build on the more expensive technology built into higher-end models; the “bones” of the device should be as good as any on the market, ensuring a high-quality experience that delivers on all the benefits headset use can provide.

Furthermore, look for a headset that has been optimized for UC; this will ensure that the applications and services your employees rely on for business communications and collaboration will deliver maximum benefit, and that the headsets you purchase support all your UC needs. Additionally, with a headset optimized for UC, it enhances the user experience with its inline controls such as call, answer, and mute as they are right at a user’s fingertips.

WEBCAMS MATTER, TOO

External HD webcams ensure video conferencing participants see a clear, crisp picture, allowing them to get the most out of their UC applications. Unlike built-in PC cameras, webcams can be adjusted according to a specific user's needs and the environment he is in, delivering an experience that ensures meeting participants can read facial expressions and body language, see the materials and products under discussion, and not get distracted by his surroundings. When choosing a low-cost external webcam, look for platform certification and application optimization, HD quality, auto focus, low-light performance, and a wide field of view.

CONCLUSION

In today's business world, headsets create a private, personal space within a communal environment. By eliminating background noise and elevating audio and voice fidelity, they make it possible for employees to get the most out of their virtual meetings. No more asking to repeat what was just said, straining to catch dropped words and understand context, or struggling to stay focused on the matter at hand. Headsets allow users to concentrate on the content of the discussion, driving participation and boosting productivity. This, in turn, increases the return on investment for the organization – not just for the headsets, but also for the applications and services they support.

As a result, smart companies are deploying the devices to all their knowledge workers, throughout the organization. To get the most out of their investment, managers should look for low-cost headsets that deliver high-quality audio, and which can stand up to constant use in an open-office environment.

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