



To VOIP or not to VOIP?

There has been much hype over the last few years about VOIP (Voice over Internet Protocol). Many have predicted that traditional PBX's would be dead in the water by now but this is certainly not the case. Contrary to the assumption that many potential buyers start with, VOIP is not guaranteed to save money.

There are however some specific situations where VOIP can make a significant impact on your business.

Beneficial Impact

If your company has multiple locations or remote workers that are currently sharing a Local Area Network (LAN) or a Wide Area Network (WAN) then you are a prime candidate for VOIP. You would share the full features of your phone system across all of your locations with calls between sites via extension dialling.

VOIP can also save money if you are setting up a new office as you will not have a separate cabling system for your phone system.

What is VOIP?

The traditional method of routing a call is by using "circuit-switched" technology whereby a dedicated path from caller to receiver is created for the duration of the call. VOIP treats voice as data and turns your words into tiny packets of information that are sent over data networks.

To provide business grade VOIP you will need several components.

A central device manages the calls. This can be a dedicated piece of hardware such as an IP-PBX, a traditional PBX that has been IP enabled, or a server running specialised software.

You will need phones and a data network. In some cases you may be able to use your existing telephones and computer network, although you may have to upgrade some of your network hardware.

Depending upon the set up, internal calls will be routed over your existing phone network or your computer network. External calls to other company locations get routed over your computer network. Calls to external numbers are sent through the network to a gateway

which connects to the public telephone system. All of your calls will connect seamlessly to any phone user and you will not have to worry about compatibility issues.

Potential drawbacks to VOIP

High quality sound requires quite a bit of bandwidth and whilst some networks are fine for data they may not be up to the demands of VOIP. Computer networks are designed to handle messy data. Packets arrive out of order but in most cases the data being sent can be easily reconstructed before it is needed. Voice conversations however are not as tolerant. Each packet has to arrive in the correct order because they are being sent in real time. Your network also has to give priority to voice over data.

VOIP phones are network dependant and to businesses where phone service is absolutely critical this can be a concern, because networks can occasionally be brought down by a server crash or other problems.

Buying VOIP

Some suppliers, particularly those from a data networking background sell VOIP only systems and this can drive your costs up unnecessarily when a hybrid traditional/VOIP system might be fine for your needs.

There are also suppliers that will simply add VOIP to your existing network whether or not it is fully ready to support voice traffic. When you complain about the call quality, they will try and sell you upgrades

Always make sure that you get a thorough appraisal of your current network and the impact VOIP will have on it. Buying VOIP from a supplier that has long traditions in telephony is the best choice for most businesses

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