



Alternate Access Quarterly Newsletter

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Holiday Closing

Alternate Access will be closed
for the following holiday:

April 22, 2011

The VoIP Communication Triumvirate: Planning Ahead for a Positive VoIP Experience Part II – Your Phone Service

We continue our exploration of the communication triumvirate this month by exploring phone service—taking a holistic view of phone service and your phone system so you can increase the efficiency and functionality of your communication services and reduce the cost of running your business.

VoIP Changes the Landscape

The movement away from traditional phone service toward Voice over IP has meant that the local network and Internet connection, which previously had little to do with phone traffic and voice quality, now take on a major role in ensuring consistently clear communication for your business. Additionally, phone service providers are no longer the primary source in delivering telephony features to the end user; VoIP phone systems themselves now offer much of that functionality. This shift is accompanied by a change in cost structure.

Before the advent of VoIP phone systems, businesses depended on the phone company to augment their systems with capabilities. Phone service providers have developed a host of functions over the years including caller ID, call blocking, call waiting and hosted voice mail. Each of these components incurs add-on fees to your monthly phone service expenditure. Today, quality VoIP systems have changed the landscape offering those functions (and more) as built-in features so businesses need not be “nickel-and-dimed” with monthly phone service fees ad infinitum.

Customized Phone Numbers Broaden Your Company Footprint

VoIP implementation opens up a nation (literally) of possibilities in giving your business greater penetration in markets all over the country. Businesses have the ability to purchase phone numbers cheaply, for pennies a month, in markets where they make or receive many calls. This capability boosts operations efficiency, customer service and call tracking. It allows businesses to save the cost of 800 numbers and exhibit a local presence in their key markets. Correspondingly, customers may feel more comfortable dialing a local number for their vendor’s products and services. Whether a business purchases phone numbers to give the appearance of existing in local markets or actually has physically remote offices, VoIP technology can tie these entities together to ensure a consistent customer interface, seamless backup between locations and efficient management and tracking of the entire call flow process.

Security is Fundamental

As your phone system now interrelates to the Internet, a firewall is critical to ensuring security for the voice assets in your business. VoIP is another application on your network, and a well thought out plan for your overall network security should cover VoIP also. Many security measures that are appropriate for traditional phone systems also apply to VoIP, such as using strong voice mail passwords, restricting privileges on extensions that are in common areas, and training users on phone call “phishing” scams. Read more about ensuring a healthy network in Fall 2010 Quarterly Newsletter on our web site.

Assessing Your Bandwidth Requirements

Making the shift to VoIP provides a great opportunity to get in touch with your true phone system requirements. To determine the appropriate bandwidth your business requires, it is useful to have a

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Gaining an Advantage in the Move to a Remote Workforce

Our office has smartphone fever.

While our smartphones are personal purchases, rather than company-issued, most of us have experienced increased productivity in our personal lives thanks to these palm-sized pieces of technology. It doesn't stop there; our laptops, notebooks, iPads and cell phones are critical to our daily lives.

Fortunately, we are not alone.

Many companies are realizing the benefits of integrating these technologies into their daily operations as well, allowing more of their employees the flexibility to work remotely.

According to a report from Insight Research Corporation entitled "The Mobile Workforce and Enterprise Applications 2007-2012," revealed the following statistics:

- 89 of the top 100 U.S. companies offer telecommuting
- 67 percent of all workers used mobile and wireless computing
- 58 percent of companies consider themselves a virtual workplace
- Only nine percent of employees worked at a company's headquarters

Overall it is estimated that more than 187.9 million workers currently are mobile. Forrester Research, an independent technology and market research company, anticipates that number will increase to 397.1 million by 2012, which will account for 73 percent of the global enterprise workforce.

How You Can Be Ahead of the Curve

Alternate Access offers many communications solutions to move you ahead of the curve in this shift towards a mobile workforce. The right phone system can provide the capability to create a virtual headquarters or a physical office supported by remote workers.

Our systems allow users to easily add remote employees, deploy any needed hardware/software to remote users at a minimal cost, and easily train them on how to use the system. Enhanced conference call features make it easy to join remote workers for weekly team meetings, monthly project updates or quarterly reports. Finally, the ability to access your business phone system's functionality from anywhere, and at any time, increases employee accessibility and productivity. Their "office" can be any location – from a home office to a hotel room or even an airport terminal.

Depending on the brand and model phone system that meets your business needs, you may also gain the advantage of:

Presence management – Managers and remote employees can quickly check the availability of their staff and co-workers, ensuring that everyone stays connected.

Unified Messaging – Employees can check one place for voice mails, e-mails, and, in some cases, faxes. This capability also allows for one point of contact, eliminating the need for multiple phone numbers (i.e., an office number, a cell phone number, and a home office number).

Call recording – Sensitive or complex issues can be discussed over the phone and recorded to avoid miscommunication. Detailed order information or specifications can be captured during a call and reviewed later to ensure accuracy.

Connection via your choice of technology – Most phone systems offered by Alternate Access already allow remote employees to connect via desktop PC, laptop or notebook. Now some are adding the option of connecting via smartphone.

Images put a face with a name – Some phone systems offer the option to see the employee's head shot in the contact manager. So even the most remote employees can put a face with their teammate's names. This capability can make remote employees feel more like part of a team.

Benefits of Going Remote

Whether you already have a local, national – or even international – customer base, you can utilize a mobile workforce while giving the impression of one unified business or office. Doing so can save your business money by reducing office and travel costs, while also increasing worker productivity and reducing absenteeism and staff turnover.

Instead of having employees constantly travel across the state or country to serve customers, and paying for those travel expenses, hire an employee or team locally and connect them to your main location remotely.

Instead of losing your top salesperson because he or she needs to spend more time at home, arrange a way for them to work from home to meet their needs while retaining their talent at your company.

Instead of expanding your company's reach by spending time and money to locate and rent office space in a new area, implement remote area phone numbers to give your business a local feel in key cities that you do business without ever moving a person.

These specific scenarios are just a few of the ways businesses can benefit from well integrated communication systems for remote employees. In addition, research has shown that productivity increases when employees are given mobility. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated the average employee workday at 8.8 hours in 2008. However a 2010 survey conducted by iPass found that the average workday for mobile workers is one hour longer – yielding about a 10 hour work day, or six more productive weeks of work each year.

"The era of the 'corporate mobilocracy' (mobility rule) has begun," according the "iPass Mobile Workforce Report – Understanding the Enterprise Mobility Trends and Mobile Usage." Mobile technology is reaching a saturation point. Gone are the days when only executives could enjoy mobile technology, and thus, telecommuting.

If you decide to join other businesses in developing a productive remote workforce, contact Alternate Access at 919-831-1860 to investigate the way a new phone system can help you reach that goal.

(Your Phone Service continued...)

good understanding of your current call volumes and breakdowns of local, long-distance, incoming, outgoing, domestic and international calls. You will need to determine whether devices that require analog phone service such as modems, fax machines, credit card machines, security alarms, elevator phones and door access devices can be migrated to VoIP. These devices should be identified ahead of implementation so they are addressed in your conversion plan.

Whether your business supports two phone lines or two hundred, having the right configuration ensures that your customers are not met with busy signals, conference calls take place as needed, and remote users are seamlessly integrated with your phone system.

Alternate Access consults with our customers to help them determine bandwidth requirements and the phone service (and phone system) features that best fit the business. Our comprehensive understanding of phone service offerings can help avoid common pitfalls that businesses face and often find room for cost-savings. The phone service contract is a prime example.

Beware of Contract Pitfalls

Many companies don't realize that a transition to VoIP can be done in phases. For customers who are locked in to long-term contracts with phone service providers that preclude using VoIP for external communications, there is still an opportunity to implement VoIP internally and save on wiring cost in your implementation. VoIP enables more efficient use of your infrastructure because you no longer need two separate networks for voice and data – making it easier to manage too.

In addition, various options abound for how local, long distance and toll free calls are billed, and often businesses do not take the time to determine whether a measured rate (based on duration and distance) is better or worse than a message rate (based on volume) or a flat rate for their business. The answer is, "it depends." In fact, we frequently talk to companies that renew their phone system contracts as a matter of course, without reviewing the charges, and end up continuing to pay their old rates, which are substantially higher than current ones. So if you are jumping at a short-term deal from your phone service provider and not conducting due diligence on your contract, you may be shortchanging yourself for the long run.

Here are a few examples of how Alternate Access can achieve cost savings for customers:

Example #1: We have a longtime customer who we installed nearly 10 years ago with an analog system. Over the years they have used the same phone service vendor and each time their contract comes up for renewal, they automatically sign it and keep moving along. Recently we conducted a phone service audit for them and were able to realize a 4-fold reduction in their expenditure. Their phone service savings means they will have a payback period of 5 months with their upgraded VoIP system that provides all the functionality they are accustomed to and more.

Example #2: We recently worked with a client who spends \$1133 on a month to month contract with his phone service provider. By implementing a new, VoIP phone system with full functionality from Alternate Access, we can save him \$300 a month, including BOTH the cost of the phone system and phone service, and the company will have faster Internet service to boot!

Example #3: Unfortunately, one prospect signed a 3-year phone service contract before coming to Alternate Access. He got locked in to a \$1500 monthly phone bill. Had he come to us before signing his contract, we could have shown him a way to cover his phone service and the cost of a new phone system for just \$850 per month.

Each of these customers fell victim to the way that Local Exchange Carriers to do business. Their prices are typically rigid and high, making any reduction in services or termination of a contract costly or impossible.

What these customers lacked was not only the knowledge and discipline to decipher their contracts, but more importantly the insight to take a holistic view of their communication costs. We can help companies understand how implementation of a VoIP phone system and selection of the appropriate phone service vendor and contract options can increase functionality while potentially lowering ongoing communication expenditures.

Taking a Holistic Approach

Most phone system sellers know phone systems. Phone service vendors know their phone service. But, the relationship between your phone system and phone service is integrally related. Alternate Access knows phone systems AND phone service. We take a holistic view of your telephone communications to help customers select the right service and avoid contractual pitfalls that lock them in to long-term costly plans.

If your current service contract is nearing expiration – preferably 120 to 90 days out – it behooves you to speak with us. We can walk you through your phone service considerations and review your contract options in the context of your phone equipment needs. We can help you weigh short-term gimmicks that appear to lower your price but have long-term consequences, and help you get the best service for the dollars you spend. It is not unusual for customers to save 30% to 50% off their recurring phone charges once they implement recommendations from Alternate Access.



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