
The State of Business Telephony Systems in 2011

Even just a few years ago, a business telephony system was a straightforward installation. You chose a public branch exchange (PBX) based on the number of extensions and the calling features you needed. Calling features and phone extensions are still important, but new technologies have greatly broadened your choices for a business phone system. In 2011, phone systems have been transformed by the widespread acceptance of Voice over IP (VoIP).

Once the realm of only the largest enterprises, VoIP technologies are now available — and affordable — to even the smallest companies. Essentially, VoIP allows you to make and receive phone calls over the Internet and along your local IP network. Many companies that install IP-based phone systems upgrade their networks and Internet connections at the same time; voice traffic is data-intensive and requires at least Ethernet speeds and a broadband connection. Also, voice networks are often converged with data networks, which means that you're running both data and voice traffic on the same network.

In general, an IP-based phone system is not unlike an analog phone system: The core of the system is a PBX, which delivers various call and message features and connects your business extensions to the public switched telephone network (PSTN), and compatible desk and conference phones round out the solution. But that's where the similarities end. An IP-based PBX tends to be much less complex to deploy and manage, especially for smaller companies. In addition to IP-based desk phones, you can install softphone clients on each PC, which allow users to plug in a headset and make and receive calls directly through their computers.

The rise of cloud computing has made VoIP solutions even more accessible to smaller companies. With hosted voice offerings, the IP-PBX resides on the service provider's network — you don't have to install or manage any part of the phone system, aside from the phones or soft clients on each user's desk. A cloud-based phone system not only eliminates the IT burden, it also opens up a world of advanced features that usually cost much more in an installed phone solution. Hosted voice is also easier to scale when you need to add new extensions or even new facilities to the phone system.

In 2011, a business phone system isn't just about making phone calls. It's about all methods of communications, so the phone system is also about enabling Unified Communications (UC). VoIP is the starting point for a UC solution, which includes collaboration, instant messaging, conferencing, email, presence and more. UC, and all communications technologies, are evolving rapidly. Business phone systems and services today must be quickly scalable, easily manageable and tightly integrated with other communications apps as well as business applications, such as customer relationship management (CRM).

Consumers' overwhelming embrace of mobility technologies has also changed business telephony solutions in 2011. More and more, telephony providers are extending their phone systems to include mobile employees and their smartphones. Some systems now offer VoIP applications for smartphones that integrate with the system, giving users access to the IP-PBX calling and message features and allowing them to call within the same VoIP telecom network.

Last year was particularly tumultuous in the business telephony market, thanks to several mergers and acquisitions. Most notable, Avaya purchased Nortel's enterprise division, and HP bought 3Com's data networking and voice portfolio. Still, companies have several vendors to choose from, and they range from networking giants such as Cisco to software titans such as Microsoft to telephony experts including Alcatel-Lucent. Other key players in the IP telephony market include ShoreTel, Aastra Technologies, Siemens and Mitel. Today, there are a raft of hosted VoIP providers in the market, targeting companies of all sizes. Most major carriers now also offer hosted voice services, including AT&T, Verizon and Sprint.

In 2011, business telephony systems are all about consumer choice. You can now choose between traditional, analog and IP-based phone systems. You can also choose between phone systems you install to your own network and cloud-based services that you simply access through the Internet. Perhaps the most important aspect of any phone system you deploy today is the choices it gives you for future communication initiatives.

About VoIP News

VoIP News is a long-running news and information publication covering all aspects of the VoIP and Internet Telephony marketplaces. It was recently acquired by Tippit Inc. and has been relaunched as the premier source worldwide for business VoIP information. The site provides original content covering news, events and background information in the VoIP market. It has strong relationships with members of the VoIP community and is rapidly building a unique, high-quality community of VoIP users and vendors.