



Is VOIP Right For Your Business?

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The global competitiveness of our industry is completely changing the way we do business. With more and more of our customers—and even some of our divisions—being international, the need to stay in touch, yet cut costs, is more prevalent than ever.

One cost-saving option is Voice Over Internet Protocol or VOIP. It has seen growth in the private sector (think Skype and Vonage), but is it right for your business?

Historically, VOIP was not considered a good choice for businesses because of the expense of installing and implementing the system, lack of interoperability and poor quality of service. What it did give you was free long distance calls, including some international calling.

Today's VOIP is business-ready and not just for voice applications. Along with the free long distance, it supports instant messaging, video conferencing and video surveillance for security. It also has an impact on your network infrastructure. VOIP systems run on Ethernet networks and require at least one server

and high-speed Internet access at minimum.

There are VOIP systems for both small businesses and large enterprise companies. The options for small business, while being cost-effective to implement, often lack many of the features of larger VOIP solutions. Depending on the hardware you have, your voice quality might suffer.

The larger, feature-rich systems can be costly. Along with the hardware costs, there is system design, training and technical support. Your current infrastructure also has to be robust enough to handle voice and data across the same network. Also, if you do not have an on-site network administrator, there can be an issue with technical support.

There is another option: outsourced VOIP. Outsourced Internet Protocol (IP) phone system solutions are gaining popularity among small businesses, especially those that lack the in-house staff and internal resources needed to operate such a complex system on their own. These solutions can offer the features you desire, and they are very appealing, but research is the key.

So, how do you gauge your VOIP readiness? Obviously, the first thing is to determine if your current phone system still works for you by answering the following questions:

- Are you having a lot of issues maintaining your current system?
- Are you planning on moving, expanding or have a need for new phone service?

Determine what your current costs are, including local, long distance, cellular phones and maintenance of the current system.

Then, look at your options between traditional and VOIP systems. Some considerations:

- Do you have multiple offices that need to interact often?
- Do you have a lot of remote users, such as salespeople and employees that often work out of the office?
- Would video applications be beneficial to your company?
- Is your current phone system covered in your disaster recovery plan?

If you answered yes to one or more of these questions, VOIP may be an option for you. Determine if you have an information technology staff and network that would support VOIP. Or, consider whether or not you would want an Outsourced IP. Then, the research begins.

There are VOIP systems out there for both small businesses and large enterprise companies.

The Internet has a wealth of information, but the best references come from current VOIP clients. Ask questions at your next networking event or on the PMPA Listserve.

When you work with a competent, reliable, service provider, and you know about all of the fees up front (including maintenance), you just might find that VOIP is the best solution for you. ■