TECH AUDIT

VoIP Migration Leads to Savings and Employee Mobility

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BUSINESSES ARE TURNING away from PBX (private branch exchange) systems and toward Voice over Internet Protocol telephony, which lets conversations travel as data across the Internet. By 2013 more than 80 percent of businesses will use VoIP, according to research by In-Stat.

Small businesses looking to ditch PBX landline phones can cut costs and increase productivity.

VoIP can be ideal if your company handles many calls among multiple people, has mobile employees, or runs satellite offices. It can help shrink or eliminate the cost of long-distance and conference calls. VoIP also allows you to manage calls as you would other data. For example, a caller's contact information may pop up on a Web-based dashboard or on a smartphone with a VoIP app when they ring your number. Depending on the service, voice calls can be translated into text that you read via e-mail or on a phone. Many services also offer instant messaging, virtual meetings, and videoconferencing. VoIP is key to integrating all your communications into a digital hub.

If you have a local- or wide-area network, you've laid a lot of the groundwork. Make sure your firm has a T1 line or better before trying to cram calls through a sluggish pipeline.

VoIP Options

Hosted VoIP leaves the heavy technology lifting to another company. It can help a small business appear bigger, providing call transfers and phone numbers for employees. It can include toll-free numbers and integration with e-mail and fax software, too. You buy or lease IP phones, and download software. 8x8 and Speakeasy are among the many hosted-VoIP companies; your ISP may also offer VoIP.

With on-site VoIP you'll have to handle all of the hardware and the calls, so it's essential to consult an IT pro. Avaya and Cisco are among the vendors to consider. If you're upgrading from a pure PBX system, a VoIP gateway device can help make the transition. Once you have VoIP going, you should optimize your router and network to prioritize traffic and ensure high call quality.

As for drawbacks, a hosted service may lack customization or may charge fees for adding features or users; it could leave you high and dry if it goes belly-up, too. With on-site VoIP, you risk the headaches and costs (including a large up-front investment) that come with managing any tech equipment in-house.

Before you make the switch, compare what you now spend on phone service with what you project to pay a VoIP provider. Figure in hardware and ongoing maintenance, and add the cost of a faster Internet connection, if needed.

CASE STUDY

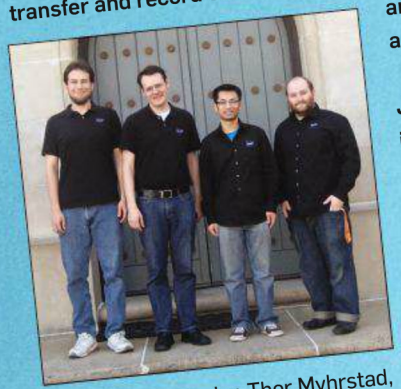
Heating-Products Firm Saves With VoIP

JTG/MUIR, WHICH SELLS energy-efficient heating equipment, struggled with an aging PBX phone system. The Oakland, California, company turned to BoxIT to upgrade its system, and BoxIT chose VoIP. JTG/Muir threw out the NEC telephones on its staffers' desks to make way for Yealink SIP (Session Internet Protocol) phones.

For the pipeline, BoxIT selected a Cbeyond Cloud Services SIP Trunk. It also chose a free, customizable Linux phone system with a Trixbox CE server, based on Asterisk software; this allows users to handle calls either on the Yealink phones or via the Counterpath Bria soft-phone app on a laptop, an iPad, an iPhone, or an Android handset. A Web-based Fop2 Flash operator panel allows staff to view who is on which call, and to transfer and record calls. Remote employees can use the Follow Me feature, which lets an office extension ring offsite. Voicemail sent as a .wav file can play on a smartphone or laptop.

In addition to providing flexibility for its staff, JTG/Muir is saving $1200 each month and enjoying three times the bandwidth of the PBX system.

—Case study submitted by BoxIT. Reach founder Thor Myhrstad at www.boxitweb.com or at 866/761-6148.



BOXIT'S Eric Hasler, Thor Myhrstad, Chhay Chea, and Matt Meier.

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