VoIP can be more than just a phone solution

Cisco predicts that, by 2018, wireless/ mobile internet usage will surpass wired systems. Given this recent piece of news, it's likely that most communications will be IP-based in the next few years (if they aren't already).

Instead of serving as just another phone solution for your business, VoIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) is beginning to serve as the backbone for new kinds of software-powered communications.

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Supporting new types of work

Unlike traditional phone systems, VoIP phone systems can be scalable, which means that you pay for the services you're currently using, and then add features as your business needs change in the future. A VoIP solution can also support a growing trend for businesses in Wisconsin and across the country: telecommuting.

Stanford University says that 10 percent of the U.S. workforce can now be classified as "remote workers," and that number is only increasing. But even though more employees are working offsite, they'll still likely need to collaborate regularly with coworkers in the office (or with other remote workers).

Remote working can't be effective if there isn't efficient means for communications in place.

VoIP functions as a communications solution that goes beyond just a phone call or conference call. When incorporating "presence" features, employees can see the real-time status of their entire team.

Instead of guessing whether your coworker is available to answer a question, you can check his or her availability instantly, making it much more efficient to set up team sessions or meetings on the fly. It makes the entire collaboration process easier.

This type of technology also can help support unified communications, which is becoming a reality for businesses. If an employee calls a coworker's office phone, but they don't answer, then the coworker receives a call on their cell phone. If the employee leaves a voicemail, it can quickly be transcribed to text and sent to the coworker's email inbox.

VoIP also can be integrated with cloud platforms such as Microsoft Lync, for example. Simply by clicking on a user's name in your Lync chat screen, a phone call can be placed. It's possible to even "pin" a contact if he or she is on the phone, and then place a call once notification is received that they're available.

How to plug in

Power can be provided to VoIP phones by either plugging them into an electrical outlet or through Power Over Ethernet (PoE). PoE uses the spare, unused wires in an Ethernet cable to carry power to the phone device. PoE provides power to all the features of the handsets except for the basic voice line. Because of the VoIP system's uninterruptable power supply, handsets and features will still work even if office power goes down.

VoIP two ways

If VoIP is an option for your organization, then there's one more decision left to make: should you purchase the equipment and hardware or work with a hosted solution where someone else owns and maintains your system while you pay a monthly fee?

If you don't have a large IT staff, a hosted solution allows you to place responsibility of system delivery, maintenance, and support elsewhere (typically with the manufacturer and the company that designed and installed the system for you).

A hosted solution also minimizes large capital expenses. Small companies can choose to pay only for the VoIP services they need now, and then add phones and services as the business grows.

A hosted phone system creates flexibility, too, enabling employees to work from anywhere. You can provide telephone connectivity to employees out in the field or senior executives on business travel.

Evaluate your situation carefully to determine which type of VoIP solution will suit your business best.

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