

View from Top: Biz VoIP gains momentum

August 1 2005

Driven by the pressures to reduce capital expenditures and increase communication features and functionality, businesses are rapidly embracing the adoption of Voice over Internet Protocol phone services to unify corporate communications.

VoIP promises enhanced mobility and productivity -- and significant cost savings -- and has attracted so much interest in the market that industry research firm IDC now predicts the hosted IP-voice-services market will reach \$7.6 billion by 2008. Now that these services have evolved to a point where they are truly viable for all businesses, what market issues remain and what applications are driving VoIP adoption?

When VoIP first came to market, the service challenge was simple: voice quality and reliability. Over the past several years, vendors have taken a giant leap forward in the operational implementation of VoIP, and made great progress in eliminating quality as a market barrier.

This has been partly achieved by the arrival of "managed" VoIP services via proprietary networks that are rigorously engineered to ensure quality. Certain applications that relate to perceived reliability, such as emergency 911 functionality, are also being integrated as a standard network service.

The good news for business owners is that cost wars continue to push pricing lower as more service providers enter the competition for the business VoIP market. However, serving the business market is far more complex than the general consumer and residential markets. In addition

to higher quality requirements than those of consumers, business customers often have multi-layered infrastructures with multiple office locations, highly mobile employees, varying service levels for different management functions and differing opinions on how to manage telecommunications equipment and services. For this reason, it is essential to select an experienced service provider that has a diverse set of applications that are easy to use and manage.

There are several choices available to business customers. They can install and integrate their own VoIP infrastructure, or they can outsource that function to a "hosted" VoIP service provider. Initially, the allure of migrating to hosted VoIP often is its ability to reduce deployment complications and capital expenditures, but many businesses are recognizing that the benefits go well beyond these initial cost savings.

VoIP service providers have been rapidly expanding their application diversity and functionality in recent years. In addition to standard services such as local, long distance, international and free "on net" calling, today's new VoIP applications are taking corporate communications to new levels and significantly enhancing productivity. The following are some of the compelling VoIP applications businesses should look for when selecting a provider:

--Conference Calling: Utilizing VoIP for conference calling helps ensure availability and flexibility. With instant access and "always on" functionality, impromptu calls can begin immediately, eliminating timely set up and costly fees. Look for providers that include easy web controls and toll-free numbers.

--FindMe/FollowMe: For those employees, especially mobile employees, who are tired of juggling multiple phones and voicemail boxes, FindMe/FollowMe will drastically reduce the time spent connecting with customers, partners or co-workers. This application enables one number

for all communications needs. Whether it's a cell phone, desk phone, home phone or any other phone, FindMe/FollowMe provides a single point of communication that allows individuals to auto-route calls on a pre-set schedule depending on the time of day. Look for providers that can route voicemail messages to email or pagers.

--Unified Messaging: The ability to listen to messages from any Web-enabled computer or touchtone phone can save valuable time. This application lets employees forward messages via email or phone, download or save messages to a computer, and returns calls with the touch of a button. Look for providers that offer unlimited message storage capacity and broad support for wireless devices and PCs.

--Virtual Receptionist: Businesses today require that customers can easily connect with the right person immediately, wherever he or she might be located. Virtual receptionist applications enable a company's main number to be a gateway to instant communication by seamlessly linking cell phones, work phones or home phones anywhere in the world. Most of these applications offer custom greetings, auto rerouting and voicemail. Look for providers that support messaging alerts and offer instant conference calling access.

--Toll-Free Calling: A toll-free number makes connecting to a business simple and free. These applications enable calls to be easily received and routed. Look for providers with integrated voicemail for additional functionality and convenience.

When bundled together, these advanced voice services applications -- and others such as fax management, calling card support, hunt groups and more -- offer a powerful communications platform for businesses.

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