

Turn your phone into a free-call powerhouse

June 4 2014

Today, let's switch on airplane mode and tune out our wireless carriers, their out-there monthly charges and long-term contractual obligations.

The next call you make is free, with a Wi-Fi connection, maybe even to the other side of the globe.

It's a glorious day with Voice over Internet Protocol, or VoIP, the technology that digitizes analog signals (like your voice) and sends them over the Internet.

Someday, VoIP and the growing number of public Wi-Fi hotspots could reshape the wireless industry. If you have landline service from your cable provider, it's a version of VoIP.

For now, these apps turn a mobile device, Android or Apple, into a powerhouse that churns out free calls, or close.

MagicJack. The magicJack app allows free calls to U.S. and Canadian phone numbers and also a free U.S. callback number so recipients know it's a familiar human, not a robocaller, on the other end.

But magicJack proved much mightier on a recent trip to China as the tour group regularly called home to the United States, free, using a Wi-Fi connection. (Calls from the U.S. to China, however, are not free.)

MagicJack also works with 4G service, so it's a potential big saver of mobile minutes at home too.

The magicJack app requires no purchase and works independently from the \$49.95 magicJack device that connects to a home computer modem or computer for low-fee monthly phone service.

This could be a go-to app - the Android version was introduced in April - for travelers who don't have international coverage from their carriers.

All that's needed is an Android or Apple smartphone or mobile device.

Information: Don't bother visiting magicjack.com. Go straight to Google Play or the iTunes Store.

FreedomPop. Peel away the free mobile-service offers FreedomPop packages with refurbished smartphones, and you'll find a free app with voice and text for Android and, now, iPhone/iPad/iPod Touch. This freebie includes 200 voice minutes, 500 texts and 500 MBs of data each month.

While FreedomPop portrays itself as a disruptive mobile service upending the industry, it has disrupted some consumers with hidden costs as well.

The company no longer buries a 99-cent "Active Status" fee charged to new subscribers of its free broadband service who use less than 5 MB in a month, but it still automatically adds \$10 to tapped-out accounts.

Information: freedompop.com

Fring. This is as close to VoIP nostalgia as it gets; fring was my go-to app several years ago for free calls with an iPod Touch.

With fring, Wi-Fi and earphones that included an inline microphone, the Touch becomes an iPhone without the monthly service charges.

Fring, an Israeli company purchased late last year by Genband, now offers free audio and [video calls](#) between fring users, text messaging and, with fringOut, low-cost calls to mobile and international numbers.

Information: fring.com

Skype. If there were a VoIP Hall of Fame, Skype would be a charter member. Skype, now owned by Microsoft, offers free Skype-to-Skype audio and video calls anywhere in the world and low-cost calls to mobile phone numbers and landlines.

Skype isn't a killer with fees, but it will email a use-it-or-lose-it reminder to dormant accounts.

Information: skype.com

Google Voice. Another VoIP giant with free calls to any phone, not just Google Voice users, in the United States and Canada. International rates include 2 cents a minute to India, 10 cents a minute to France and Germany. Text transcripts are available as a voice mail option.

Information: google.com/voice

KakaoTalk. If more than 90 percent of South Korean smartphone owners use this free app, how bad can it be? It's another service with [free calls](#) and text only within the service's network. So no calls or texts unless they're to a fellow KakaoTalk user.

The app, however, works on Wi-Fi and 3G networks, and requires only your mobile phone number to get started.

Information: kakao.com

TextPlus. Downloading the textPlus [app](#) gives you a phone number for unlimited calls and texts to its 50-million-plus users. Texting remains free to all within the United States and Canada, but calls to nonapp users start at less than 2 cents a minute. (To China, it's 2.2 cents or more per minute.)

For mobile-minute counters, textPlus also works on 3G and 4G networks.

Information: textplus.com

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