

Buyers guide: Everything you need to know about hosted telephony.

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Introduction

Often referred to as ‘Unified Communications’ hosted telephony is simply a phone system that is in the cloud rather than on the business premises.

Traditionally in order to benefit from a full range of features, a business would need to purchase a PBX (a Private Branch Exchange), which would be located on-site in a communications room. Expensive to purchase and requiring dedicated maintenance this meant professional telephony features like call recording, call transfer and multiple extension numbers were often out of reach for small and medium sized businesses. Other drawbacks to traditional telephone systems are that replacement parts are pricy and can be difficult to find, cabling problems can make changes and moves expensive and complicated. Furthermore if the site is hit by a power cut or flood, the whole system goes down and the phones stop working.

Every business needs a phone system of some sort. Traditionally this has meant a PBX box in a communications room. A PBX (Private Branch Exchange) switches calls between users within an organisation and allows all users to share a number of external phone line. Features of a PBX are typically menu systems, call recording, call transfer, IVR (Interactive Voice Response), multiple extension numbers and many more.

The problems for small and medium businesses is that an on-site phone system requires up-front capital expenditure, it requires maintenance and support from a dedicated resource (either in-house or outsourced). Other drawbacks are that a PBX will need replacing after ten years; when replacement parts become increasingly difficult and pricy to find; cabling issues can make moving the actual phones difficult. What is more, with a legacy phone system, if the site is hit by a power cut or flood for example, the phones stop working and the business loses money.



What is hosted telephony and how does it work?

A hosted telephony system is suitable for any sized business but is being increasingly adopted in the small and medium sized market space.

The most obvious advantage is the fact that with the system being held in the cloud, initial outlay is minimal. You pay the running costs and do not need use valuable IT resource in maintaining it; the service provider maintains and upgrades the system in the cloud on your behalf. However, in an increasingly competitive world organisations need to be available and responsive to stand out from the crowd. Mobile communications and the Internet are transforming the way we communicate and do business and the right hosted telephony can allow your business to do just that.



Your business needs

Small Business

As a small business you will only have about a maximum of 20 people working for you. You should be looking for something that makes it easy for you to be able to set up your phone system quickly. You also need to make sure it's not technical so you can be in control of your own IVR and the portal is accessible and easy to use for both admin and users. It is also essential in this day and age to be able to accommodate flexibility for your workers so they can work remotely and with no geographical restrictions. You will want something that gives you professional call management even on a small budget. In order to keep your costs low, look for a phone system that has a fixed budget, per monthly pricing plan.

Medium Business

If you have a Medium sized business you will have anything between 20 and 100 employees working for you. In this case you should again look for a fast set up system with the ability to stay flexible. You will need to be able distinguish supervisors and regular users from each area of the system with permission based access to certain features at different levels. Look for something that still allows you to have control of your own system such as your IVR and portal with access to 24/7 support. You will need something that can grow with your business to meet demands and stay agile. Find a professional system with automated call distribution and advanced call logging and reporting. To allow growth you will need something that keeps your costs low with a fixed monthly bundle.

Large Business

As a large business you will probably have at least 100+ employees. You will want to be able to add and remove agents with ease as the size and scale of your business expands. The ability for a large business to have offices in different areas and be able to allow their staff to work flexibly is essential, so look for something that can support multiple locations. You will want to be able to customise your call routing and reporting to suit your company. You also want to have minimal capital expenditure to keep growing and remain agile. With such a large system you will need full monitoring and 24/7 support.



Additional features

- It can be hard to decide which provider to go for with so many features and functions being added to systems to enhance products. However a thing to be cautious about is that some providers charge extra for additional features. Sometimes it can seem they are offering you all the features provided into one service price but sometimes there can be hidden costs to additional features. This is the point your business really needs to come to the decision of what features are really necessary for your company's productivity. The amazing thing about a hosted system is that it has the ability to adapt and grow with your business and still keeps your costs low. However, there is a lot of differentiation of what providers consider standard and premium feature bundles.
- **The range of pricing is also variable between providers. Some providers just offer the basic connectivity with add-ons whereas others offer bundles with extra features included in the price. The most competitive deals would be considered to be the providers that offer one monthly bundle per user with all the features included. More providers are now including features into their services however, it is important to look at each feature and consider if it would be a benefit to your company. Don't get drawn into offers of high features – you may not even need them.**
- The main core features of a cloud system is voicemail, dial tone, call transfer, conference calling, call divert and hunt groups. Some providers may consider call recording as standard this as standard others may consider it a Unified Communications feature. These features are involved mainly in other integrated systems such as CRM, messaging and presence. The choices you make on features can affect the costs.
- **Not all providers have the knowledge and skills to understand what your business truly needs so it is important to look for one that will maximise the potential of your new phone system. Most companies will want to have control of their own additions and changes. You should consider this with flexibility and control and make sure you have the right support. It is important to choose a company that is comfortable in IP communications and offers 24/7 support with qualified and experienced engineers on hand. With hosted telephony you do not need maintenance. Providers charge usually on a per user basis which makes costs predictable and easy to manage so you only pay for what you use. There is no longer need for external help to change your system as it is all controlled by you and scale on demand. You can also choose to present your geographical location and working from home is easy as the extensions are hosted on the internet. Employees who work remotely and on the go can manage their calls easily as they are all connected to the internal system.**
- Even though some providers offer an all-inclusive service with a single price per user per month others offer a low starting fee and then charge for additional feature in which the costs can escalate quickly after. Using a hosted platform usually has call costs included in the service and customers should be aware of the costs of national, international and mobile calls.

Advantages for small and medium businesses

Once a business decides they need a new phone system they should definitely consider a cloud-based (hosted) PBX. Social media, the cloud and mobile communications have transformed the way we work. Today's small and medium sized businesses need to be more available and responsive to remain competitive. This is where the IT Support Company comes in. A hosted PBX is the modern telephony solution that IT Support companies can easily introduce to their client base. More often than not the challenges facing small businesses and start-ups revolve around resources, time and budget. Often referred to as 'Unified Communications', a cloud-based VoIP phone system could be the best choice for your client thanks to the following business benefits it can offer :



- Small businesses can project a big company image by taking advantage of features like auto-attendant and music on-hold that were previously only available with larger on-premises systems.
- There is reduced outlay for hardware and set-up, maintenance costs are eliminated- crucial for start-ups and SMB's alike.
- All employees are unified on one phone system that works wherever they are; in the office, working remotely or on the road.
- Agile communication when on the move, in the form of mobile apps, voicemail to email and company-wide extensions.
- A hosted telephony system is easily scalable. Your clients can add users and features as they expand, making it an affordable and flexible solution for growing businesses.

Tip : When looking for a hosted solution to add to your product portfolio make sure you find one that allows access to a wide range of features, in particular mobile integration which is a lifesaver for the small business in the event of an unexpected disaster.

Benefits

Small Business Benefits:

- Project a big company image by taking advantage of enterprise features like call transfer, auto-attendant and voicemail.
- Stay in touch when on the move with mobile apps, voicemail and company-wide extensions, meaning you are always responsive to your customers.
- Unify all employees on a single phone system that works wherever they are, be it in the office, working remotely or on the road.
- Enjoy business continuity. As the phone system is hosted in the cloud you can continue to make and receive calls even if your business premises are effected by an unexpected disaster such as snow, floods or power cuts.
- Take advantage of number flexibility. Allocate a phone number to every user and put them in control of their calls.
- Scale your phone system with ease. You can add or remove features and extensions to meet the changing demands of your business.

Medium-Sized Business Benefits:

- Unite all company locations on one communications platform – as the service is hosted in the cloud you can support mobile and remote workers wherever they are located.
- Achieve business continuity even if adverse conditions take your office out of commission.
- Take advantage of a rich set of communications features such as video conferencing, fax, CRM integration to improve productivity.
- Re-deploy IT personnel/reduce management hassle as your service provider shoulders the responsibility for upgrades and maintenance in the cloud, allowing you to focus on your core business.
- Introduce more flexibility into your business – if your hosted solution offers a ‘one number’ feature your staff can be reached on any device and can move seamlessly between devices without hanging up.
- Increased visibility ; contact centres can benefit from advanced management features such as monitoring call answering rates and call patterns to ensure the right number of operators are in place in periods of high demand.

Tip : Consider how your business might grow over the next 12 to 18 months. When choosing a hosted solution make sure it offers all the functionality and features that your business will need not just now but you expand.

Top Ten Tips

#1 - Connectivity

Moving your communications to the cloud means that you need to be connected.

Ensure that you've considered your connectivity requirements at each site, and home that you'll need to be connected.

#3 - Devices

Choice of 'phone handset you use is a key part of the user experience – have a phone that meets your needs is easy with Universe as we have a handset for all users including a DECT solution for portability, and with full mobile integration your office phone system travels with you.

#5 - Security

Voice over IP is often under scrutiny for being insecure and the focus for fraudsters. Ensure that you chose a service provider, and service that is secure and protected. A service provider using industry security measures such as TLS and sRTP.

#7 - Feature Set

Consider the features you need for your business and does this offering cover them all. Features that businesses need are: Call transfer, hold and an Auto Attendant feature with the ability to control calls based on time of day and provide recorded messages to your callers. Mobility is a huge boon to business in the 21st century – we've all got mobile phones, why not use what's already in your pocket.

#9 - Scalability

The service does what you want now, but is it future proof, can it expand with you are you grow adding users and services when you need to.

#2 - Bundles

Bundled minutes offer cost containment and take away the concern over complex pence per minute rates. By offering unlimited calls to UK fixed and mobile destinations we have taken away the guess work in your monthly phone bills.

#4 - Portal

Managing your telephony takes you away from your real job. The time spent configuring and adjusting your call flows, or managing which of your devices are in use is precious time you're not doing what you should be doing. Choose something that is simple to navigate and is easy to use.

#6 - Compliance

Is your organisation compliance driven – PCI-DSS , or ISO accredited (e.g. ISO27001) ? If so you will be required to ensure that the service, and often the provider, you're using ensures that you maintain this accreditation.

#8 - Unified Communications as a Service

Hosted Telephony is not, on it's own a Unified Communications service. A Unified Communications service encompasses voice and data; real time communications, computer telephony integration and file sharing. Services such as Instant Messaging, data storage as well as Hosted Telephony are required to truly unify your communications.

#10 - Provider

It may sound obvious , but choosing a service provider you can count on is key. Case studies from similar businesses to yours are an indication of a proven track record.

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