

## Virtual PBX Puts a Professional Spin on VoIP

A hosted virtual PBX VoIP service may be the solution to your business needs.

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As businesses of all sizes begin to rely on VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol), the virtual PBX option, which has become a widely popular choice. A virtual PBX arrangement, in which a telephony system is provided through an Internet download and then managed by an outside service, offers a low-cost and easy-to-set-up means for a business to use VoIP services. Such a system can assist companies and solo entrepreneurs in creating a more professional image that lets them grow their businesses more quickly.

Yet for businesses searching for a virtual PBX provider, the options can be daunting. Some services excel in providing businesses with a diverse range of calling features but make it difficult to combine those features without increasing the cost of the calling plan significantly. Other providers may offer basic services at a low cost but might be unable to grow with the business's need for enhanced calling features.

Before you can choose a virtual PBX provider, as well as the plan, appropriate for your business, you should first understand what services are available and how they work.

PBX is the commonly used term for a private branch exchange, a telephone exchange system that serves one business. Originally a PBX was designed to allow companies to control their phone systems through in-house operators. Today, instead of just connecting calls, these systems also connect fax machines, computer modems, and other types of technology that route through the phone lines.

Businesses embracing VoIP were, from the start, highly interested in making use of PBX systems, but they had to find a way to do so that didn't tap their resources. The solution has been to use "hosted PBX" systems, in which an outside company manages the private VoIP system, instead of the telephone exchange system's being located at the business, it is located at the site of the VoIP host. This arrangement allows a small business to take advantage of a comprehensive VoIP system without having to maintain a staff to keep that system running.

Just as VoIP systems have begun to offer a variety of features, virtual PBX providers have evolved to supply additional services, such as messaging, call-forwarding, and call-waiting options, as well as advanced calling features such as automatic dialing. Virtual PBX hosting also offers advanced features that are unique to the integration of the phone and computer.

For example, many providers offer Outlook integration so that users can access e-mail address books through one location. Additionally, many services offer click-to-call widgets, which appear as buttons on the business's Web site or social networking profile, when a customer clicks the button, the two parties connect by phone. This is a major feature that helps businesses move seamlessly between online and voice interaction.

On a simpler level, the integration of voice and data features allows for ease of communication within the business itself. Since virtual PBX services host video, voice, and data conferencing, a company can achieve remote collaboration without investing in additional software or hardware. Moreover, virtual PBX systems provide an online means of tracking call data, which can assist with billing and budgeting.

Among a number of other benefits, virtual PBX requires no extra hardware, and little training, as a result, entails lower startup costs for the business. A virtual PBX setup might not be the right solution for every business, however. For example, companies requiring automatic call distribution may find that their options are limited, on a virtual PBX, although ACD is available through most virtual PBX systems, it tends to be a simplified version that could be insufficient for businesses regularly routing calls to different areas of the company.

### Assessing the Providers

The growing demand for virtual PBX has led to an increase in the number of VoIP companies offering the service. Each company provides the same basic service but has unique pros and cons.

Currently the top five virtual PBX providers in the market are GoVMail, Packet8, RingCentral, Vocalocity, and VoiceNation. RingCentral and VoiceNation have distinguished themselves in creating the impression that a small business is bigger than it is through the use of certain VoIP features such as call-center functions. In contrast, GoVMail has set itself apart as an ideal service for the sole entrepreneur who doesn't have a lot of money to spend on advanced features but still needs basic VoIP functions.

Vocalocity focuses less on the specific services provided than it does on the cost of its service. It stands out as a leader in lowering the overall calling costs for all types of businesses. Packet8 also emphasizes lower costs but distinguishes itself from Vocalocity by concentrating on features as well. Its most outstanding benefit is that it offers scalability, allowing you to get the various services you need at an affordable rate as your business grows.

Each company has a different feature that makes it particularly useful to certain customers over others. For example, one of the main advantages of virtual PBX is its ability to offer reduced calling costs on long-distance and international calls. The company that does best in this area overall is Vocalocity, mainly because it eliminates the long-distance charge and offers a low-cost rate for calls through the system. In contrast with the policies of other companies, Vocalocity's rates do not differ significantly based on the area you are calling, which is the main reason that it can lower costs for all types of businesses.

Another great feature of VoIP that should appeal specifically to small businesses is its potential to increase the professional credibility of the company by helping it appear larger than it is. One of the major leaders in developing and promoting this type of approach to VoIP is RingCentral, which focuses on providing services such as call-center features. Because of this approach, RingCentral is a favorite among small businesses trying to get a toehold in their industry—it serves a niche need in the VoIP community.

VoiceNation is another virtual PBX VoIP provider that succeeds in this regard. It promises to give the impression that employees working in remote locations are all situated in one office, and small businesses that use this company have reported that it lives up to that claim. For businesses that operate primarily through freelance contractors and work-at-home staff, this service is a way to present clients with a united front despite the lack of a single shared office space.

Packet8 excels in its ability to set up a virtual call center, and it puts emphasis on its service's scalability, offering calling features and plans designed to meet the needs of growing and changing businesses. In contrast, GoVMail may be perfect for the small entrepreneur who requires only a few basic services, but because it is a smaller company it cannot accommodate the services that an expanding business may seek.

To determine the best plan for your business, assess your calling needs and do research on which VoIP providers offer combinations of your desired features at the lowest rate. The main thing to consider is whether you can take advantage of features other than simple voice calling. You want to be able to integrate your voice system with your computer—that's why you're routing calls through the computer in the first place. Look at providers that offer Outlook e-mail integration, data features (such as push-to-e-mail voice messaging), and videoconferencing features. Without those things, you have just a basic phone system.

When researching, seek out companies that have several set calling plans. For example, RingCentral offers four levels of plans designed for businesses of varying size. The company's lowest-level plan, which costs only \$15 per month, allows you to connect 5 people to the line and to use a total of 100 minutes per month. In contrast, the third of RingCentral's four plans costs \$50 per month and gives you 20 connections and 1000 total minutes. Both plans offer the same basic features, including voice mail that you can push to e-mail and a click-to-call widget for your Web site. The more-advanced plan also gives you a separate fax number and a dial-by-name directory.

RingCentral's four-tiered pricing system makes choosing a suitable plan fairly easy, but it doesn't give you the means to change specific features or add the ones you desire. In contrast, Packet8 offers 13 different calling plans at various prices with a range of features designed to express the scalability of its VoIP services. While the wide selection gives you more options, it can make your decision more difficult because you have so much information to sift through.

In addition to choosing a good basic rate for your plan, make sure to review carefully the number of minutes your plan includes, as well as the cost of calls that exceed those limits. For instance, RingCentral and GoVMail both have plans that cost \$50 per month and cover 1000 minutes, but the additional per-minute rate for RingCentral is 4.8 cents, while for GoVMail it's 5.8 cents. GoVMail, however, offers more features with its calling plan, so the extra per-minute cost may be worth it to some customers.

Ultimately, a virtual PBX system should reduce the need for a small business to focus on managing its calls, and it should limit the stress that an advanced calling system can place on a business. And businesses that have remote employees or work in multiple locations may find that using a virtual PBX system to host teleconferences is an easy and efficient way to connect everyone in the company.

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