

VoIP: Making the Mobile Workforce Accessible

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Military strategy recognizes tactical mobility as an important “force multiplier” – a capability that increases the effectiveness of an organization’s size and physical resources. Such mobility has a similar impact on Internet-age businesses, enabling them to see and respond to developing opportunities and problems faster than the competition. In the 21st Century, ultimately, nothing less than real-time reaction will do.

And, as Gartner Inc. puts it, “The real-time enterprise begins with its mobile users.”

To date, mobility-enabling technologies have focused on getting the best information to and from front-line forces as they move around the office or across the globe. Today’s road warriors are equipped with notebook and handheld computers that can connect to a growing number of wired and wireless access points, from dial-up or broadband links in hotel rooms to public “hot spots” in coffee shops and airport lounges.

However, while this keeps enterprise information assets at the ready, the preferred communications medium of salespeople and other key customer-facing personnel is not data, but voice. Real-time reaction requires immediate access to people, too, whether they are down the hall or in a different time zone.

The Immediacy Factor

Mobility is often approached as an enabler of location independence, but freedom of location by itself doesn’t buy you much. The real benefit of mobility is that, when you need to do business, you can. Such immediate-response capability is achieved only when you can reach or be reached by the right people and actually *talk* to them. Only then can you truly leverage all that information you have at your fingertips. This is what the right VoIP solution can bring to the table.

It is estimated that about three-fourths of all business calls today end up in voicemail. That is doubtless where many of them belong, but some of these missed calls mean lost opportunities and forfeited revenue. Just how much is incalculable, but consider the amount of employee productivity being lost simply to telephone tag. According to a study by Sage Research, enterprises implementing VoIP were able to reduce the amount of time the average employee was spending on telephone tag by 3.9 hours per week—which adds up to 25 days per employee per year.

In the right VoIP environment, people are calling *you*, not a phone tethered to a particular location, and you can be as reachable as you want. Your phone becomes a virtual device that follows you wherever you go, with all its advanced features and your personal customizations intact. When calls come in, the VoIP system can sense your current “presence” state and make sure the really important ones don’t end up in voicemail. It can even refer to your calendar to determine where you are and how a particular call should be handled.

Mobilizing the Complete Office

The annals of information technology are littered with the corpses of products that could do incredible things but were simply too hard to use. They generally required too high a level of user training and skills, and imposed processes that were too complex, required too many keystrokes, and forced users to change the way they worked too much. There were too many calls to the technical-support staff—or even outright user rebellion—and the cost of using such products cancelled out any potential benefits. The result was the inverse of a force multiplier.

This usability factor is even more important for the mobile workforce, which is often isolated from the enterprise IT staff by entire continents and several time zones. The client side of VoIP must provide a simple and consistent converged office environment to users, whether they are at the office, at home, or on the road. This highly intuitive interface is used to access and control all office communications, including the phone system, voicemail, and email. Your entire office environment—data *and* voice—is always with you.

Of course, there may be times when you find yourself without your laptop or unable to use it. Or it may simply be more convenient to access the company network from a public Internet kiosk or a non-company computer. A highly evolved VoIP system can include a zero-install option that lets you access and configure your call handling and notification options—including call-handling delegation—from a standard Web browser. This device doesn't have to be equipped with any special client-side software in order to interface with the phone system.

To put things in better perspective, let's see what VoIP can do for a member of the highly mobile front line of a professional-services enterprise. This team of roaming consultants is the firm's primary asset, so its success depends upon getting the most out of you and your colleagues. You are an expensive, revenue-generating resource, and you need to be out and about landing new projects while working with clients on existing jobs. When you find yourself sitting somewhere away from your desk and unable to work, both the top and bottom line suffer. However, technology-imposed desk time that cuts into your face time with clients has a similar impact.

Follow Me/Find Me

If your professional-services firm is typical, it is a very fluid organization in which you must play several roles. Besides managing ongoing consulting projects, you also help the sales force to generate business. This includes preparing and delivering new proposals, and responding to questions about outstanding ones. The ability of a salesperson to close a deal may depend on your accessibility at a crucial moment—which might find you out in the field between appointments, or sitting in a meeting, or waiting in an airport because of a delayed flight or a bottleneck at a security checkpoint.

In a traditional telephone environment, the salesperson might call your office phone, get your voicemail, and leave a message, and then go through the same process with your mobile phone...which happens to be in a dead zone temporarily, or turned off so it doesn't interrupt your meeting. You are known to work from home sometimes, so the salesperson repeats the routine again with your home phone. The salesperson has wasted a lot of time, and you now have three versions of the same message to sift through across three different voicemail systems.

As soon as your mobile phone is receiving signals again, you are alerted to the new voicemail message. You pull out pen and paper, write down the number you are to call, disconnect, and then dial it. Once this critical call is finished, you use up some wait time by dealing with other voicemail messages that have piled up. You write each number down digit by digit, and then laboriously punch it in to the dial pad digit the same way—hopefully without any missteps. The process is so laborious that you end up leaving most of the messages to deal with later.

The day would be going quite differently if there were mature IP telephony technology at your company's disposal. The VoIP system's intuitive Personal Call Manager interface provides mobile workers with

flexible, easy-to-configure call handling capabilities that include powerful “find-me” features. If you are not present on the company network when a call comes in, the system can search for you at other numbers, such as your mobile phone and home phone. If you aren’t reached, the caller is sent into company voicemail, not your mobile-phone or home voicemail box. You don’t have to check multiple boxes, or listen to duplicate messages.

Caller-ID information is carried through to you, and you can elect to send less pressing calls directly into voicemail. When you do check voicemail messages and want to react immediately to one, you can place a return call or send a voicemail response at the touch of a button.

By integrating with applications such as Outlook, an IP telephony system combines presence and calendar input, effectively using your personal information to manage call flow. The system can actually check your schedule and see where you are and what you are doing when a call comes in. If the call coincides with a meeting, for example, the call handling can be programmed to send the caller directly to voicemail, or to an assistant or colleague. If the call comes in when your calendar indicates that you are on the road and between meetings, it can be sent to your mobile phone. This find-me feature can be activated at your own discretion, so you are not disturbed when you don’t want to be.

In this converged scenario, the salesperson can initiate his call from a point-and-click directory with an automatic dialer. The system instantly senses you are not in your office or anywhere on the company VPN, discovers from your Outlook calendar that you are in transit, checks your preferences for this presence mode, and attempts to find you at your mobile number. If the call doesn’t reach the cell phone, it is returned to your one corporate voicemail box, leaving you with a single message from the salesperson.

When you leave the dead zone, messaging notification alerts you to check your company voicemail box. As you go through your messages, you can respond immediately to the important ones with a single push of a button that triggers an automatic call-back to the sender of the message. You don’t have to write down numbers and dial them manually. The process is so simple that you quickly deal with all your messages, reclaiming what would otherwise be dead time, and leaving less to deal with later.

Any Phone is My Phone

The contrast between traditional and VoIP environments is even sharper when you try to “hotel” yourself at a temporary office location—such as a branch office, a hotel room, a client office, or a trailer at a construction site.

In the traditional voice world, callers don’t know the number of the phone on your temporary desk, and the local phone system doesn’t incorporate your personal telephony profile. You end up using your mobile phone half the time, and the two phones together still limit your functionality. Plus, all the calls to your office number are going to voicemail.

With a VoIP system, you sit down at your temporary location and connect to your company’s VPN, and calls made to your office number are automatically routed to you. You can choose to have them ring on the temporary desk’s IP phone, or on the softphone in your laptop computer. Your entire personal telephony profile, with all its customized call-handling options and advanced features, is available to you.

With this capability, you can now locate yourself with your clients when you need to, and yet still be connected to your office. Similarly, you can float among your company’s branch offices without forfeiting functionality. As long as you are logged on to the company VPN, the VoIP system automatically knows where you are. If you don’t answer, receptionists or assistants can even buzz you with an integrated intercom feature that works across locations.

Softphones Come of Age

Softphones have acquired a bad image over the years, because the early generations were plagued by poor sound quality and network latency. However, with better multimedia capabilities in PCs, and with advances in USB headsets, softphones can now deliver quality voice.

Suddenly, you have a business-grade telephone encapsulated in your notebook computer. It comes with you wherever you go, making your desktop phone redundant and reducing the number of devices and tools you have to deal with. At home or in a temporary office site or a hotel room with a broadband connection, you have your entire office environment with you—data *and* voice—and you can set it up at a moment's notice. All the features of the corporate phone system, and any customizations you have made with your personal telephony profile, are available to you when you attach to the enterprise VPN.

Teleworking is now enabled for all employees with notebooks, requiring no additional investment. This capability can provide some business-continuity benefits, too: If the office suddenly goes offline due to a power failure or natural disaster, employees with critical job functions can go to another site or home—basically, anywhere with an Internet connection—and resume working as before.

Conclusion

Increasing mobility is the way of the future, especially for salespeople and other front-line employees who have the biggest impact on revenue. The easier it is for them to stay in direct touch with customers and team members and business partners, and to augment “face time” with immediate voice contact, the more effective they can be. The right VoIP technology can leverage these key human resources, and give your company an immediacy that can multiply the impact of its information resources.

Of course, too much accessibility is a frightening prospect, so a good Personal Call Manager leaves you in complete control. You determine how available you are at any given time, and whether you want to turn a particular period into work time. Your effectiveness is not reduced because you are away from your office, and you are much more able to be present, no matter where you are.

