



Simplicity
VoIP

Mastering VoIP

How to Pick the Right VoIP Provider



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Over the past decade, the popularity of Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technology and cloud-hosted PBX has exploded. A hosted VoIP solution is a software system running on highly redundant servers located in professionally managed data centers which are accessible via the internet. This set-up is in contrast to bulky, on-premise hardware and software located in your company's server closet.

Companies of all sizes are choosing VoIP for their business phone solutions for a variety of valid reasons including: cost savings, flexibility and scalability. It is essential you carefully qualify prospective VoIP providers when considering a switch.

There are thirteen key factors to consider when selecting the right VoIP provider to achieve your business goals.





1. Bandwidth

To maintain high-quality voice calling adequate bandwidth to support your business's data and telecom needs is essential. Bandwidth is calculated by looking at the number of phone users and the number of concurrent calls placed on a regular basis. Looking at your current internet usage metrics is a good place to start. VoIP providers can be a great resource to help you review your present situation and assess your future needs.



2. Reliability, Redundancy, and Uptime

Unlike premise-based options, hosted systems are in data centers with redundant power and cooling. A fire, downed utility line, or a flood can take a company's phone system out of commission, while VoIP solutions can remain in operation. When utilizing VoIP, you can also reach your phone via the cloud. On-site disruptions are minimalized and your communications can continue. If the internet connection is lost at the company's location, many VoIP providers offer "call continuity" that allows an employee's mobile phone to connect to their business line for seamless call forwarding.

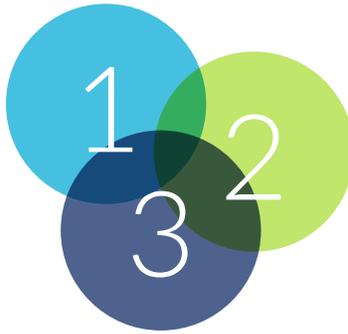
Ask your potential VoIP provider if their platform is geo-redundant. This configuration allows the provider to shift service to a second data center if the initial data center hosting the VoIP platform goes down. This ensures that your service is continued and seamless. Be forewarned – geo-redundancy is not a given, so do your research up front.

What is Geo-redundancy?

Data that is replicated between two geographically diverse sites so that applications can switch from one site to another in case of the failure (hardware, carrier or network) or natural disaster at the first site, and still have all the configuration data at the second, remote, site, necessary for continued operations.

When evaluating a provider, make sure to inquire about their uptime – the measures used in the telecom and technology industries as the percentage of time the service is available – and guarantees. Ask about what the uptime has been for the prior quarter or year, and if the uptime exceeds the provider's guarantees, this is a good sign.





3. Hardware

Unlike premise based solutions, VoIP business phone system requirements are minimal. All you need is a router with Quality of Service (QoS), a switch, and phones.

There are numerous types of phones and selection is based on the users' needs and functions. You can elect to purchase phones outright or to rent them over the term of the agreement. There is a higher premium to rent, but if the phone breaks or you wish to upgrade to new technology, many agreements offer that at no cost to you.



4. Features

Beyond the basic features that all VoIP systems offer – call forwarding, call hold, and voicemail - your business's needs drive the type of features that you require.

Common VoIP features include:

- Call recording
- Speed dial
- Busy lamp field (BLF)
- Music on hold
- Caller ID
- Extensive call center options
- Call center analytics



In addition to feature-rich platforms, you are no longer required to involve an outside provider when you want to make changes. You can self-serve using a cloud-based admin portal.

Carefully evaluate your needs and understand feature pricing. While many providers bundle features in the monthly seat cost, many will strategically offer popular options like voicemail to email for an additional cost. The intriguing initial low monthly price of \$19.99 can quickly rise if you don't be careful.



5. Mobility

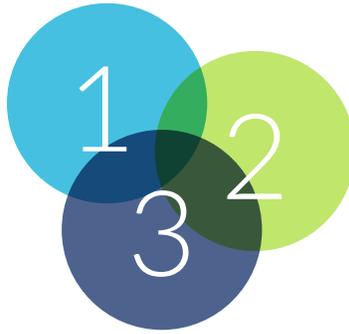
With today's business climate, many employees are on the go and work remotely. It is important that the company's business phone system allows teams to connect wherever they are and on any device. As the "bring your own device" (BYOD) trend for business increases, business phone features via mobile apps needs to be available to provide the mobile worker full system access. Enabled by internet connectivity and cloud hosting, mobile solutions are some of the most attractive offerings of VoIP systems. It is important to understand mobility's pricing – is it included or an add-on cost? This can dramatically increase the cost per seat.



6. Mergers and Acquisitions



There are hundreds of VoIP providers in the US. It seems that every day, telecom companies, including VoIP, are gobbling each other up. When evaluating a VoIP company, research if they are a target for acquisition by another provider, especially if it is a provider that you do not wish to do business with. Next, look at their financial stability. Many VoIP providers are "buying" their market share in the form of free phones, high commissions payouts to agents, etc. Consider their sustainability – can they go on indefinitely with these business practices?



7. Quality of Service (QoS)

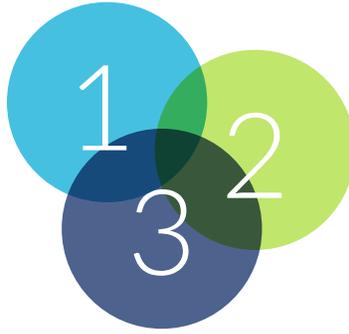
QoS is imperative to ensure that the audio quality of your business calls is crisp with no jitter or latency. Technological advances have practically made call quality a non-issue if you have the proper bandwidth and internet connection. Have your connections tested – your potential VoIP provider should be glad to assist - before you sign an agreement. In many cases, QoS technology and protocols are built into the hardware regulating your network traffic. If something should go awry, with proper QoS in place, your VoIP provider will be in a position to assist you.



8. Scalability



Are you growing? If so, your system must be easy to expand and your business phone system provider needs to be able to support you over the long-term. Whether you need to scale for seasonal activity or for a large expansion, the cloud-based nature of VoIP should offer you the flexibility to scale your phone system. As providers do vary, confirm the availability of this option upfront when discussing your business needs.



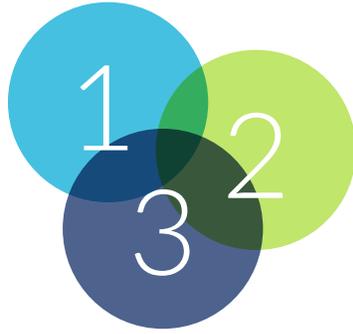
9. Support and Service

It's important to anticipate your needs and ask questions during the selection process so that there are no surprises once the agreement has been signed. Hosted VoIP providers manage their systems virtually, so most service calls can be handled quickly and efficiently without deploying a technician. The online admin portal that comes with your VoIP phone system also allows for you to make changes without involving the provider, if that is your preference.

Here are several questions to consider:

- What level of service do you need?
- Are you a small to mid-size business with limited IT staffing or an enterprise that has a large IT team?
- Would you like to manage your system yourself or would you like the provider to do it?
- Do you need 24/7/365 support? When you call for support, what is the provider's process – is there a trouble ticket component or is your need addressed at the time of request?
- Does the VoIP provider offer on-site service including site surveys, installs and training, and at what cost?





10. Installation and Training

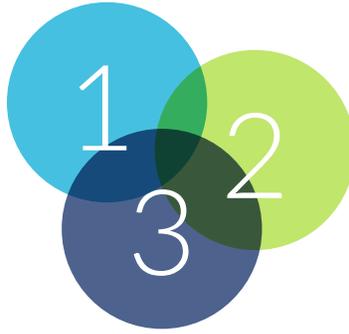
VoIP systems are simple to deploy when properly planned and supported by an experienced provider. As long as an adequate internet connection is available, numbers can be ported, phones can be configured and connected allowing the system to be up and running in the same day. (Note: Porting numbers happens prior to the day of installation and takes from three to ten days.) There is seldom any downtime when leaving an old system and transitioning to a new one.

Where a big difference between providers comes into play is the installation and training practices. Many providers simply offer a “plug and play” option – phones are ordered, configured and shipped to you. You then plug in the hardware and watch the online training videos provided to learn how to use the phones and admin portal. Some providers offer on-site installations and training at a cost; some providers waive the cost. It’s important to confirm how potential providers will deliver your new phone system and evaluate the options that work best for your team’s skill level and how to get the most value for the investment.

Questions to ask providers are:

- Are there shipping charges?
- Who installs the phones? Is there a cost associated?
- Is training provided?
- Who does the training – is it delivered on-site or by video?
- Is there a cost associated with training?





11. Price

VoIP pricing differs greatly from provider to provider. What seems to be a straightforward price can actually be wrought with add-ons to secure popular features and solutions. When pricing your VoIP phone systems, it is important to understand what is bundled in the seat price and what the extras will cost you. As referenced before, an initial low monthly price can quickly rise with hidden fees.

Pricing can be done several different ways: by seat (or phone), extension/call path combination, or extension/call path/usage model. Depending on the plan and the bundled/unbundled charges, prices vary.

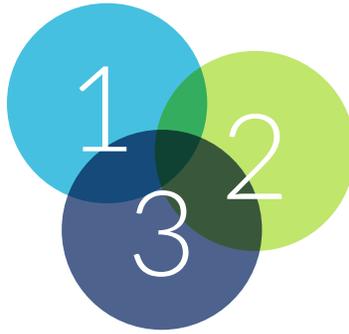
For example, a business needing service for 50 users could opt for:

- **Seat pricing:** \$25 per seat - \$1,250/month
- **Extension/call path pricing:** \$906.70/month
- **Call Usage pricing (projected):** \$1,172.65/month

In addition to the plan and phone charges, there are non-recurring and monthly recurring fees, taxes, and international calling rates to consider. Ask for these fees, taxes and rates to be provided with your quote so that there are no surprises. Certain providers charge for phone programming, installation, training, and shipping of equipment, as well as managed services fees. Because providers are allowed to set certain fees (regulatory recovery, federal recovery charge and E911) as they see fit, there are often dramatic variances between providers. Tax padding happens, but is harder to prove; there are online resources to check specific VoIP taxes. Again, transparency is key. Ask for projected fees and taxes before you sign an agreement – if the provider isn't willing to provide these, beware.

No plan fits everyone – there is one right fit for you and your organization, if you ask the right questions and consider your options.





12. Security

Regardless of the vehicle, traditional legacy phone lines with an on-premise PBX or over the internet through a cloud-hosted PBX, you must be conscious of system security. The “cloud” is no longer considered to be an emerging technology and today’s businesses maintain an unprecedented level of confidence in it due to ongoing advancements. Top VoIP providers deploy extensive resources to ensure that their offerings are secure. Utilizing proper encryption, authentication protocols, anti-virus software, deep packet inspection, and Session Border Controllers, providers can create more secure systems than traditional wire based ones. Some providers even maintain their own technology rather than working with a third party. Ask questions of your potential provider to make sure that you’re confident and your business is protected.



13. References

Ask for references, case studies or testimonials from your prospective VoIP provider. It’s ideal to speak with another in your industry, but just hearing another business owner’s experiences – the good and the bad – may be key in selecting the provider that will best suit your needs. If a VoIP provider is reluctant to provide references, this is a red flag.





Call Today for a Free Telecom Audit

To learn more about how switching to VoIP can help you become more efficient and profitable, contact us at **804-412-7283** or by email: **info@simplicityvoip.net**.