

Transform Your Communications with a VoIP Phone System

This technology can revolutionize the way you make and receive calls.

By Ken Narita

Missing calls from the public and potential donors shouldn't happen to you. But it does happen with old-fashioned phone systems. That's why many nonprofits have switched to voice over internet protocol (VoIP). These phone systems provide cost savings, the ability to work from anywhere (and still use your office phone number), and many other features that you can personalize for your organization.

What Are VoIP Phone Systems?

Voice over internet protocol phones, as the name implies, use the internet to make and receive calls. Some service providers enable you to use analog phones, but the majority provide IP (Internet Protocol) phones that can be plugged into any ethernet jack. Using a web portal and login, you can customize features such as creating a welcome message or adding new users.

VoIP Versus Traditional Landline Phones: What Is the Difference?

The biggest difference between VoIP and landline phones, in a word, is technology.

Landline phones haven't changed much since the beginning of the 20th century and require an infrastructure of wiring and hardware. By today's standards, landline phone technology is limited, allowing users to only make and receive voice calls.

VoIP technology has changed how organizations communicate. While IP capabilities have been around for several decades, VoIP services have advanced in recent years, thanks to innovation and faster internet speeds.

Unlike landline phones that require add-ons for features at additional costs, VoIP systems come with an array of popular communication features already built in.

How Do VoIP Systems Work?

VoIP phones work by turning your voice into data and transmitting it over the internet, similar to sending e-mails.

If you've used Skype, you've used VoIP. VoIP calls are made on your phone, connected to the internet with a network cable or adapter, or via a computer's microphone and speakers using an app. When making calls, the VoIP service provider routes the voice data between you and the other caller – all within a split second.

Understand the Basics of VoIP

VoIP PBX. PBX stands for Private Branch Exchange and is an organization's private phone network. VoIP PBX is a cloud-based phone network that a VoIP service provider manages in the cloud. Organizations pay a monthly fee to use the service.

Ethernet. Ethernet is the internet delivery system within a local area network (LAN) – as in the network of computers and devices in your office. You'll connect your IP phone units to the internet with an ethernet cable.

VoIP Systems Transform Communications

As your organization grows, having a phone system that aligns with the public's expectations is critical. Unlike traditional landlines, VoIP systems come with powerful features to help you make big impressions, such as:

Virtual receptionist. Missing important calls because your phone is busy or your greeting is unprofessional is easily resolved by a virtual receptionist. When a live person can't take a call, the virtual receptionist takes over. Instead of hearing a busy signal or being put on hold, callers listen to a message and can be given options on how to proceed.

“When you can't take a call, the virtual receptionist takes over.”

Ring groups. To ensure every caller has a positive experience, you can program ring groups to ring simultaneously – so everyone in a department, such as donor relations, receives the call – or ring sequentially, from person to person until someone picks up.

Mobility. Staying connected to the public when away from the office is crucial today. It's not practical or professional for employees to use their personal numbers for business. VoIP systems, unlike landlines, support working remotely through mobile and desktop apps, as well as voice messages forwarded as e-mail attachments – allowing employees to make and receive calls from anywhere in much the same way they would from their work site.

Conference calling. If conference calls are an integral part of your work, you understand the need for a conference phone that delivers the perfect sound. If callers find it hard to hear participants, the meeting will be challenging.

To ensure everyone experiences in-person call quality, look for a conference phone with the following features:

- 360° voice range
- an array of built-in microphones
- echo-cancellation background noise suppression.

Most IP conference phones come with bluetooth or ethernet capabilities. Choose the connection that works best for you and make every conference call a success.

Virtual fax. Faxing remains an important form of communication for many offices. With VoIP phone systems,



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you can still send traditional faxes from your phone to a fax machine. Virtual fax removes the need for fax equipment.

Faxes are converted to PDF files and managed within the end-user portal. Each user who needs access will have fax capabilities via their phone extension. The account manager can review the logs to track all virtual-fax activity.

Existing phone number. Keeping your office phone number, your lifeline, makes the transition to an IP system seamless. The moment you plug in your phones, you'll be able to make and receive calls. No need to change business cards, letterhead, and website information. Your VoIP service provider can take care of moving your number to your new system.

Simplify Your Office Phone Hardware

One of the differences nonprofits notice when switching to a VoIP system is the reduction in on-premises equipment. Traditional phone systems require the installation of large wall-mounted fixtures, followed by upgrades and IT servicing.

With VoIP systems, the hardware consists of one or two compact, plug-in pieces.

When it comes to switching your phones to VoIP, you have device options. You can continue using your existing analog or digital desk phones, or if you'd like to upgrade, you can purchase IP phones. Based on your users' needs, maybe you need cordless phones that staff carry with them as they work. Or perhaps your receptionist requires a specialized unit to make fielding calls flawless and professional.

Set It Up

Setting up your VoIP system takes, literally, just minutes. Once your desk phones and starter kit arrive, follow a few simple steps:

Connect your base station (a tablet-sized router that sorts out voice data and traffic to ensure clear, reliable calls) to your analog phone.

Plug in wireless extensions (into regular power outlets) to connect analog phones to the internet.

Connect IP phones to an ethernet jack. 

Ken Narita's marketing career spans more than two decades. Whether advising emerging startups, guiding clients, or now leading SMB marketing at Ooma (press@ooma.com), Ken takes an empathetic approach to addressing goals, gaps, and opportunities.

Key Advantages of VoIP Systems

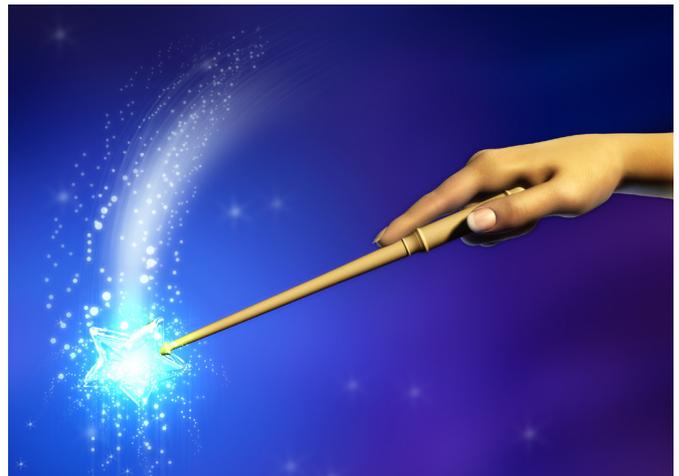
A professional welcome. How people perceive your nonprofit often depends on their initial phone interaction. When they call, it's frustrating to simply be put on hold. With VoIP, they'll hear a welcome message with easy directions rather than being put on hold immediately. Whether your nonprofit has 10 or 200 employees, your nonprofit will sound professional and welcoming.

Excellent call quality. With technology advances and increased internet speeds, your VoIP phones will provide the call quality you need.

Reduced costs. Lower cost is one of the most appealing benefits for switching to VoIP systems. Those with landlines understand that the significant expense – setup fees, monthly costs, per-line expenses, etc. – all add up, including IT support.

24/7 customer support. Any time you switch to new technology, questions come up. It's important to know that you can call your service provider and get the help you need. With VoIP, you can. Whether you have questions about the initial setup or need clarification on billing, your dedicated support person will help.

Connection with remote teams. Employees today are working everywhere. A VoIP system provides the tools to communicate with staff effortlessly – no matter where employees are.



More Phone Magic

For more, take a look at these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

Fundraising & the Virtual Call Center (Vol. 28, No. 3)

Connecting through the Camera & Keyboard (Vol. 38, No. 3)

Dialing for Dollars, Reinvented (Vol. 38, No. 3)