

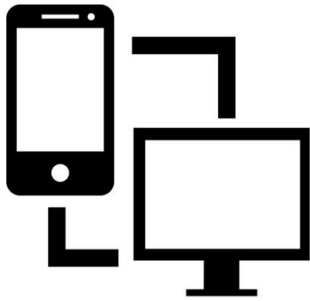


A Beginner's eGuide to the Benefits and Varieties of VoIP Services

A TechPRO Media eGuide
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Executive Summary

Companies are trading in their traditional phone systems for VoIP due to its flexibility and increased efficiency. Whether you're a small business or an enterprise, it's important to find the right provider to meet the needs of your VoIP plan. This eGuide outlines the essential features in a calling plan and how the competitors in the market stack up with their features, service plan, ease of setup and use, network, and support.



Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services provide businesses with an alternative to traditional phone systems. Instead of using physical hardware these phone systems are virtual, using broadband Internet connections to provide a host of communication features for a cheaper price. These systems are continuing the trend of virtualization of traditional systems, in this case unifying phone and Internet technology.

VoIP phones work by breaking down the audio signal into binary, and re-converting it back to audio on the other end of the line. Organizations have a choice between hosted and non-hosted services. A [high-quality hosted service will handle all of the major phone operations off-site](#), taking care of almost every technical aspect involved with delivering and receiving calls. The only on-site hardware required are the VoIP phones themselves and sometimes a small service box.

A non-hosted service requires a company to purchase and maintain the virtual phone server themselves. This requires an IP-based private branch exchange to route calls appropriately, and a PSTN gateway to convert analog audio signals to digital so they can be transferred, and vice-versa.

How does a VoIP system help a business save money?

VoIP services provide businesses with greater flexibility for less cost. A [VoIP system connects directly to your broadband connection](#), without the need for buying and installing phone lines. The necessary hardware is often installed by the service provider, and it can even be installed in the homes of telecommuters.



With many VoIP services, a user can connect to the service remotely from their own laptop using what are called softphones. Softphones are applications which basically allow a computer to provide phone services. When these applications are used in combination with Bluetooth headsets and other hands-free communication devices, they can turn any computer into a flat-rate phone in which Internet is the only fee.



This mobility turns out to be a big money-saver, because business travelers can use their VoIP system to make long distance calls from hotels for much less than a typical phone line. [Hotels can in some cases charge at least a dollar per minute for a traditional phone call](#), but usually have a flat fee for their Internet service. This means that travelers can use their remote VoIP adapters to access the hotel's Internet connection to make their calls at the flat price of the Internet fee, instead of paying for each minute.

Another way to use VoIP for cheap long distance calls is to combine it with prepaid cell phones. Callers can use these phones and their prepaid services to connect to a VoIP portal, which can be used to communicate with any number in the world for only a small increase in the basic cost. A one-hour call from Europe to the United States, which can cost over \$70 with a traditional phone service, can be reduced to under \$10 with this method.

In general, VoIP systems reduce cost by virtualizing hardware and providing remote service administration, collapsing many technologies and functions down into a smaller package.

Comparisons of VoIP Service Providers



There are many VoIP providers out there, with different features and rates. Top Ten Reviews has compared the best, [and lists its top ten picks for business VoIP services on their blog](#). They judged the services along five categories: the features provided, the service plan, ease of setup and use, the network, and the support available.

When they looked at features, they figured that every quality service will provide the standard services of call forwarding/waiting, call transfers, voicemail, and e911. Instead, they looked for more advanced abilities like mobile applications, call queuing systems, and the Find Me/Follow Me system, which routes calls to alternative phones when a person does not answer their incoming call.



The service plan includes aspects like network accessibility, access to long-distance calling, number of minutes, flexibility of rates, etc. Ease of setup and use is important, because making the switch to a VoIP system from a traditional system can be quite complicated and overwhelming.

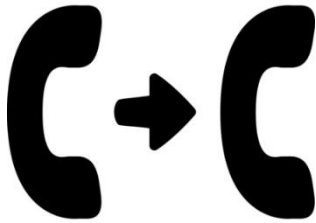
When checking a service's network, they looked for fully redundant networks that are unlikely to drop calls. The best come with Service Level Agreements, which are guarantees to provide a certain level of service at certain times. When evaluating the support a service offers, quality of documentation was checked, as well as availability of live customer support.



The number one pick by Top Ten Reviews was [RingCentral](#), which received a 9.73 out of 10. This service includes the 'hunt groups' feature, which is a type of queue that routes calls unevenly to the members on a list – the people at the top of the list will receive more calls than those at the bottom. ACD queues (automated call distribution) is also available to distribute calls evenly. Find Me/Follow Me is also included, as well as a mobile app by which users can take calls and adjust settings.

Service plans come in 1-3 year contracts, and prices start at \$19.99 per month. The network is very reliable and fully redundant with a 99.99% Service Level Agreement, meaning the network will be almost always available. There are two server locations in the U.S, and a 30-day money-back guarantee is included. The website features a learning center full of webinars, success stories, forums, articles, and a blog.

Some of the downsides of this service are calls being limited to three-way, and that performance information is only available as raw data, rather than charts and graphs.



[Jive](#) is second on the list, with a 9.60 rating. This service has all of the features mentioned above, as well as a virtual queuing system that lets a calling customer leave his or her number with an automated system. The system will automatically call the customer back when a representative is available to speak with them, so they do not have to wait on hold. An online account manager gives users a simple, powerful control panel to customize their systems, letting them choose how many times a phone should ring, where to direct calls, and how phones should ring during holidays.

This service deals with month-to-month contracts. Their network is also fully redundant and comes with a Service Level Agreement. There are three server locations in the U.S, and this product comes with a 45-day money-back guarantee. Telephone and email support is available 24/7, and the website includes helpful videos and tools.

Jive loses some points in the ease-of-use category, and for instituting an added fee for incoming calls on the toll-free number.



[Phone.com](#) is third with an 8.48 rating. The previously mentioned features are included except for Find Me/Follow Me, ACD queues, and the virtual queuing system. Some outstanding features of this service are the ability to have up to 99 participants in one conference call, and unlimited minutes while in the U.S. and Canada.

This is not a contract service. The network is fully redundant, with two server locations in the U.S., but no Service Level Agreement is provided to ensure network availability. A 30-day money back guarantee is included. Phone.com provides great customer support, with a FAQ section and live online chat support. Phone support is local and toll-free, and available in English and Spanish.

The downsides of this service are an extra fee to get information about calling statistics, as well as the relative lack of features.

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