



Telephone technology: Is Internet telephony ready for prime time?

Talk can be cheap with VoIP



Kippes

A. T. KIPPES

One constant cost involved in running a law practice is the monthly expense of telephone services. Telephone costs for businesses are much more than residential services. Costs can exceed hundreds of dollars each month for just the most basic services. When you add additional necessary features such as call forwarding, three-way calling, and voicemail, be prepared to be nickel-and-dimed by the phone company.

This article will discuss the various telephone technology options so that you can reduce telephone expenses while still being able to utilize the services needed to operate a successful law practice.

VoIP - What is it?

Making or receiving telephone calls from your computer is possible by using Voiceover Internet Protocol technology (VoIP). This technology enables users to communicate with others from their computer via the Internet. Because of advances in technology, communicating through your computer is nearly identical to communicating via telephone. If you want to access this technology, you need to have a high-speed ethernet connection such as cable or DSL. You will also need a headset or a phone with an adapter.

Advantages and disadvantages

One of the major advantages of using Net phone service is how little it costs. For only a few dollars a month (not including the cost of DSL) you can set up a professional telephone system for your office. For example, Skype costs about \$35 a year for outbound calls!

However, this technology is not without drawbacks, which is why you should not totally rely on it for all of your office telephone needs. Access to local 911 may not be available with this technology, meaning that you might not be able to reach local 911 if there were an emergency. Also, keep in mind that if there is a power outage or you cannot access the Internet for whatever reason, you will not be able to make or receive calls.

Vonage (www.vonage.com)

The Vonage Web site promises users that “with Vonage, you connect your telephone to your high-speed Internet connection using the Vonage phone adapter that we send you. Pick up the phone, and use it just like you do today. You can be up and running within minutes of receiving your Vonage phone adapter.”

For sole practitioners and law firms, Vonage’s Small Business Premium Unlimited Plan is probably the best bet. For a flat-fee of \$49.99 a month, you get unlimited local and long distance calls anywhere in the United States, Canada, Puerto Rico and some European countries. You also get a dedicated fax line at no extra cost, as well as call waiting, caller ID, call forwarding, call return, and voicemail. When you sign up, Vonage also gives you a free phone adapter, so you do not need to worry about that additional expense.

Vonage also has some other benefits, with the most important one being that you can probably keep your own telephone number. To find out, all you have to do is enter your phone number on the Web site and a message will instantly tell you whether you can use it with Vonage. This is extremely beneficial, since one of the major factors preventing lawyers from using this type of technology is the need to change numbers and risking losing clients. Vonage has addressed the issue of 911 calls, so that by completing some extra paperwork, you would be able to contact the police or fire department in case of an emergency.

Additionally, since Vonage has recently resolved its patent lawsuits with Verizon, Sprint Nextel and AT&T, the company will be putting its focus on developing new products and plans, including international long-distance plans. Keep in mind that Vonage has been subject to many online complaints about their customer service, so you may want to avoid them until these problems have been resolved.

ViaTalk (www.viatalk.com)

Another option for making calls using your computer is ViaTalk. With the Business Unlimited plan at



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\$35.95 per month, you get unlimited calls within the United States and Canada, as well as a free fax line. Other features include voicemail, call hunting, call waiting, call return and caller ID. Emergency calls using 911 are available in some areas.

Skype Pro™ (www.skype.com)

Skype has been around since 2003 and is now owned by www.ebay.com/. Skype is easy to use and inexpensive which explains its international popularity. It is available in 28 different languages and used in nearly every country around the world.

Skype is by far the most affordable, easy-to-use option. There are several plans to choose from. The free plan allows you to call other Skype users for free. This means that if you have a Skype account and your colleague or client has a Skype account, you will not be charged for those calls. For lawyers who have clients in other parts of the country or Canada, this can be an affordable com-

munication option. Both the lawyer and the client could just download the free Skype program and talk for free.

For those people who want to use Skype as their telephone service, there are plans targeted to small business or individual users. The best plan for sole practitioners or law firms is the Skype Pro™ plan. For only a few dollars a month, you can make free calls nationwide and to Canada, free conference and video calls, have the ability to transfer or forward calls to other phones, and voicemail. For a minimal additional fee, you can get your own phone number. You can also make international calls for a nominal charge, averaging about three cents a minute. If you do not want to sign up for a monthly plan, you can simply buy "Skype Credit" and have the ability to make low-cost calls on an as-needed basis.

Using Skype is simple. You just go to the Web site and download the Skype software. The software itself is intuitive and downloads quickly. You can then se-

lect the plan that works best for you. Skype streamlines the payment process by allowing you to pay using your PayPal account. If you need to buy headsets or Skype phones, you can also do that directly from the Skype Web site.

Conclusion

Given the recent developments in technology, using your computer to make telephone calls has never been easier. Although most lawyers do not want to give up their landlines just yet, this is an easy and affordable resource to try. Once you start using it and see how it works, you will definitely want to include this technology in the running of your law practice.

A. T. Kippes is a graduate of the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley and Golden Gate University School of Law. She focuses her practice on competitive employment litigation, non-compete issues, and animal law.