

The buyer's guide to hosted phone systems



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Not so long ago, corporate phone systems were clunky and inconvenient affairs, with tangles of wires trailing across offices, or crudely hidden behind cable ducting glued to the wall. Adding extra phone lines or moving to new premises was a logistical nightmare, and the vagaries of a hardwired system meant occasional downtime – due to damaged roads, faulty wiring, infrastructure failings or any number of other potential pitfalls.

Today, the internet provides a thoroughly modern alternative. Just as faxes have given way to email, while online brochures and interactive websites have eclipsed posted sales literature, so hosted

phone systems have replaced traditional desk phones and taken advantage of today's high-speed broadband and mobile technology.

However, these web-based phone systems still mimic the design and interactivity of traditional landlines; users continue to pick up a conventional handset and enter an 11-digit number, with the auditory reassurance of traditional dial tones and twin rings.

Over the following pages are ten key considerations buyers should take into account when choosing a new hosted phone system.

1. Is a hosted phone system reliable?

The main difference between hosted and traditional phone systems involves the way data is transferred. Rather than relying on a dedicated copper wire to relay phone conversations, hosted systems digitise voice data before sending it down the same cables used for broadband. By relocating phone calls online, supremely reliable systems can be established, which are impervious to bad weather or broken phone lines. Faulty phone systems can result in poor customer service that may tarnish a company's reputation for years, so it's far better to adopt a system that won't fall over in a gale, or be severed by a misplaced road worker's drill.



4. How is the hosted account managed?

Another advantage of hosted phone systems is that they are controlled through a web portal. Network/account managers can configure and modify these systems far more easily than with traditional hardwired infrastructure, while billing information and usage data is also instantly accessible. Software updates can be implemented automatically, so new features come on-stream immediately, and this in turn lessens the risk of phone systems becoming outdated.



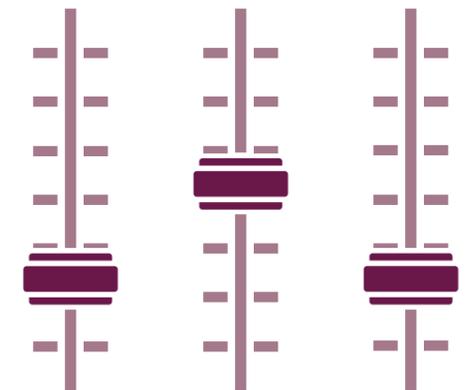
2. How much hardware is required?

Voice-over Internet Protocol (or VoIP) phones can connect to the internet with Ethernet cables or wirelessly through Wi-Fi. Fewer cables means fewer sockets on the wall and fewer wires in crawlspaces, in turn reducing the need for expensive telecoms engineers- or the dreaded service ticket in an automated technical support queue. In essence, these phones require no more hardware or infrastructure than smartphones. Moreover, compatibility between devices is assured, so staff who have been trained to use one phone should be able to operate them all.



5. Is a hosted system customisable?

In a word, yes. Conventional phone contracts generally assumed everyone had the same requirements in terms of conference calling, voicemail, recording options and diverts. However, because hosted systems place the administrator squarely in charge via an easily-controlled web portal, there is far more scope for customising the system around each user's specific requirements.



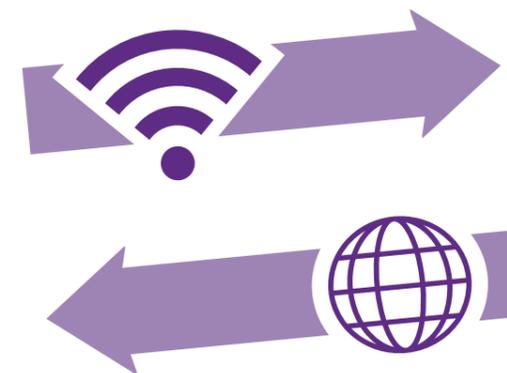
3. How many accounts

A hosted system brings landlines and mobiles together in a single cohesive phone network, with one all-encompassing contract and less billing paperwork. Because everything is housed under one virtual telecommunications roof, the system can be updated easily and expanded effortlessly, which lends a degree of flexibility that is ideal for companies as they grow, diversify or relocate.



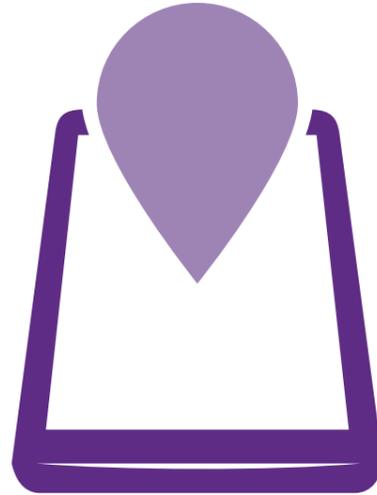
6. Are allocated numbers portable?

Phones can be switched seamlessly from an office's Wi-Fi network to the cellular service of a mobile telecommunications partner, effectively turning one handset into both a desk phone and a smartphone. There is no longer any need for separate office and mobile numbers, which simplifies matters for employees and customers alike.



7. What about geographic restrictions?

Historically, your location was revealed by the area code (and local BT exchange) you were using. Because hosted telephony is sent over the internet, this is no longer the case. That brings a number of benefits, including the ability to infer your staff are in a certain area even when they're not. For instance, customers in London who see an 0207 area code on an incoming call would assume they were speaking to a local agent, rather than someone based outside the capital, or working remotely.



One consequence of this is that employees can work from home while using their normal office line. That's useful for companies wanting to offer the flexible working arrangements that employers are increasingly championing and it's invaluable in the adverse weather conditions that affect the UK for over 30 days each year.



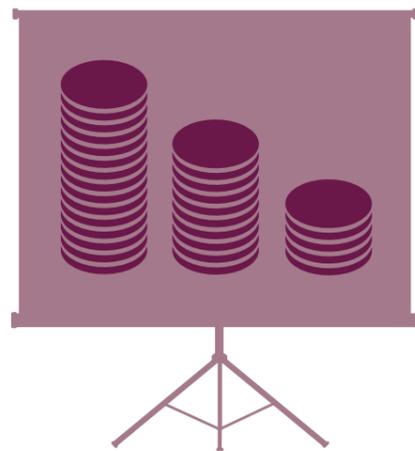
9. What does a hosted phone system consist of?

Combining fixed and mobile telephony into a user-controlled online interface, it requires a minimal capital outlay, yet round-the-clock support is provided for everything from number porting to handset training. While the handsets themselves resemble conventional office phones, their interfaces and features are more intuitive, ensuring users are comfortable using their new telecommunications devices.



8. How much will this new system cost?

One of the biggest benefits of hosted phone systems is their relative affordability, and these cost savings are largely due to a lack of physical infrastructure. Just as sending an email eliminates postage fees, so hosted systems do away with trunking and exchanges, as well as expensive maintenance contracts. Cost-savings may be secondary to quality improvements when it comes to hosted phone systems, but greater affordability will always impress the FD.



10. What if my company's circumstances change?

Hosted phone systems are particularly good at expanding and developing to suit a company's changing needs. Traditional phone contracts provided a fixed amount of preordained telephone numbers, in a fixed set of locations, for a fixed period of time. By contrast, hosted packages can be adjusted and relocated at will, requiring minimal infrastructure. There is no downtime during office relocations, since the devices simply plug-and-play. This portability is beneficial for companies who rent, rather than own, their offices. Few things are more likely to induce headaches than trying to cancel an active phone contract because a satellite office is unexpectedly closing...



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