



# 4 Things Every Manager Should Know About Business Telephony

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**A**s a leader in your organization, your responsibilities include managing the activities, processes and infrastructure required to create and deliver your company's goods or services. For most organizations, Telecommunications (voice, internet and data services) play a vital role in these processes and infrastructure, and have a very significant impact on the overall success of your business.

Not many years ago, business telecommunications was very simple – a telephone line plugged into a phone. With this simple setup, a business was able to connect with their customer and suppliers, and their customers and suppliers were able to connect with them.

Today is different. Business telecommunications is multi-dimensional and complex, involving devices, networks, and equipment that are used to help organizations communicate with customers and colleagues. There are many options for connecting your office with the outside world, including email, the internet, remote access connections and Wide Area Networking. Today, business telecommunications is not just important, but absolutely *Mission Critical* to your company's success.

Recognizing that a reliable and cost-efficient business telecommunications infrastructure is *vital* to your success and profitability, it makes sense to take a look at how your current telephony profile is (or isn't) aligned with and contributing to your business goals.

## **Step 1: Start With a Review of Your Existing Telecom *Strategy* and *Infrastructure***

A quick check on your existing situation will allow you to focus on what you need to do next. Look at how your infrastructure is supporting your business strategy (Sales, Customer Support, Expense Management, etc.) Are you taking advantage of the best technology available to produce, market and deliver your goods and services? Your processes should be based on the best possible expense/outcome ratio, not defined by the communications products you happen to be using today simply because you've used them in the past.

The information gained from this review should highlight potential operating cost reductions or opportunities to improve service to your customer, possibly without substantial changes to your existing infrastructure and services.

One example of this type of exercise can be found in voice messaging systems. While the uninformed manager may not even consider such a common application, world class organizations look beyond the obvious and consider how it may contribute to overall business operations. Consider these four common problems:

1. People often move around and it can be difficult to maintain contact with key employees.
2. Offices are fixed in place and have physical or financial constraints on their size.
3. Investment in current systems may be a perceived limit to the ability to change.
4. Your workforce depends on voicemail in order to carry out its core business.

Consideration of these problems from a holistic viewpoint will often show how telephony can be part of a better overall solution. For example, single contact phone numbers and unified messaging for key employees who move around; the use of remote “telecommuting” employees to make the best use of limited office space using Voice Over IP (VoIP) technology; enhanced services delivered over your existing physical infrastructure; and voicemail alternatives such as group notification applications and voicemail to email.

## **Step 2: Conduct a Technology Review**

Many businesses are achieving significant benefits by deploying new technologies, many of which do not require an upgrade to existing infrastructure and equipment. Consider the following (non exhaustive) list of enhanced telephony applications. Use it to get you thinking about areas for possible improvement and added support of your business goals.

- Unified mailbox (email, voice mail and faxes all in the same Inbox)
- Text to Speech
- Auto Attendant (key or voice activated employee directories)
- SMS Messaging
- Single phone number for reaching you or your employees whether on landline, home office or mobile
- Ability to easily move, add or change phones without having to call in your phone vendor
- Redistribute Contact Center employees around the office – or the globe
- Gather statistical information on the number of calls going to voice mail, dropped, etc.

- Implement Interactive Voice Response (IVR) to increase the efficiency of customer service
- Get your emails by voice or SMS
- Send voice replies to emails you've received
- Publishing a single phone number that reaches you anywhere, instead of multiple numbers
- Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) for routing calls to employees with different skill sets
- Integration of existing programs such as CRMs, contact management and email
- Audio Conferencing
- Video Conferencing
- Web-casting
- Recording selected (or all) phone calls
- Using the IP data network for voice traffic
- Remote automatic backup of your data to a secure data center
- Outsourcing of your server management, Email server management, etc.

Telephony applications such as those above should be selected based on your business requirements and not driven by the feature alone. Consider Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), which is technology to send voice traffic over computer networks. VoIP provides a low cost and efficient way to complement or replace traditional (read "outdated") PBX or phone systems. It can also be used to transport voice calls between physical offices no matter where they are in the world, essentially making one big phone system that all offices share with no long distance charges, easy 4-digit dialing, and other unified feature sets.

But you should only consider moving from a traditional TDM-based phone system and service to VoIP if you:

- Are spending unnecessarily on two or more networks (separate voice and data)
- Are moving offices
- Are nearing the end of a lease or service contract for a traditional TDM/PSTN system.
- Need more lines or trunks on your current voice network
- Have already invested in a Quality of Service (QoS) data infrastructure
- Are restricted in beneficial features/applications by your current voice infrastructure
- Are planning to deploy a Customer Relationship Management application
- Would benefit from Unified Messaging
- Have or would like to move toward a distributed workforce model

### **Step 3: A Best Practices Review**

While different businesses and industries may have different requirements, Best Practice principles are often similar across vertical markets. Sitting down for a friendly and open chat with your direct competitors is probably unlikely. But it's reasonable to find an opportunity to speak with a similar business you don't directly compete with, and to exchange advice and ideas. You can also get a lot of Best Practice information from your current provider or another telecom carrier account representative.

General areas to look at are your people and their skills – increasing productivity through internal process reviews and searching for time saving practices by changing the way you work and use your systems. Systems implemented several years ago may have lost some of the reasons for the original decision to implement them. A Best Practice study can realign the original reasons for the system(s) with actual implementation and use. Best Practice can help to reduce costs and increase efficiency by learning how other organizations have used technology more effectively.

So how do you compare your organization against the competition? Here's a simple exercise: Invent an imaginary customer inquiry based on a common inbound call to your own company. Then call your competition and see how your call gets handled. Pay special attention to the following:

- Did the person who answered the call understand the company they work for?
- How easy was it for you to reach the correct individual or group? If you were transferred, did you get through to the right person?
- If you called in after hours, was there an Automated Attendant to handle your need? Did your selections get you to the right place, or was it a frustrating circle?
- Were you given another phone number to call? How would that have influenced your view of the company if you had been a real customer? Would it have been easier for you to just be transferred to the right person or reach their voicemail directly (single number reach)?
- Worst of all, did you sit on hold for a long time, or were you cut off?

Repeat the test on your own organization and compare and analyze the results. What did you learn from the way the competition handled your inquiry? What can you learn from them? Are there areas you can improve on to meet or beat your competition? Did you feel the technology they used was well-designed and helped the call? Were the people you spoke to giving you a good experience? If so how? If not, what could have been done better? Exercises such as that above will offer potential shortcuts to identifying good processes.

## **Cost/Benefit and Return on Investment**

Potential improvements to your company's overall profitability, productivity and efficiency include:

- Reducing call costs using an alternative carrier and/or internet service provider
- Quit paying for separate voice and data services by using the internet for your phone traffic
- Free calls between your sites using VoIP
- Single number to simplify contacting key employees (both for management and customers)
- Reducing your abandoned call rate by avoiding long wait times for the caller
- Avoid outbound call backs by getting callers where they want to go on the first try
- Intelligent call routing and distribution without human intervention
- Logging, monitoring and possibly recording calls to improve procedures and workforce skills
- Linking to in-house databases, email systems and address books
- Presence – knowing when, where and by what medium someone is available to talk (especially effective for a distributed workforce)
- Unified Messaging – email , voicemail and faxes all delivered to one single Inbox for improving the time it takes your workforce to deal with, prioritize and respond to customer and internal communications
- Screen pops with customer details from your CRM as the call comes in to improve customer service and the customer's perception of your speed and efficiency at helping them

## **Potential improvements to your company's customer service:**

Customers in today's market are quick to seek new vendors or suppliers when they have a bad customer service experience. Therefore it's more important than ever before to continually improve your customer's experience. Here are some tips, as this experience relates to business telecom.

- Don't make customers frustrated by long hold times or, even worse, a phone that rings and rings with no one picking up the other end. You should decide how long of a ring time is acceptable and achievable. Have your phone system programmed with that ring time before the call is routed somewhere else.
- Instead of sending callers right to voicemail if the person they're trying to reach isn't available, try offering to direct them to an alternative live person that can help them right away.

- If a caller is transferred to someone's voicemail, they should have the option to transfer back out to the receptionist (or another person) instead of being forced to hang up and call back – they might never do it! Make sure this doesn't transfer them to yet another person's voicemail.
- Your voicemail greeting should be recorded daily, mentioning what day it is. This gives your caller an incredible sense of confidence that you are up to date and proactive in returning calls. Your caller will be much more likely to leave a message and, more importantly, he or she will feel better about having to do so.
- Use SMS text or email notifications to let you know when you have a new voicemail. This will increase your ability to respond quickly to your customers.
- Make sure that any Interactive Voice Response (IVR) menus that you have are not too convoluted. Make sure the customer won't get confused and frustrated by having to navigate through a confusing tree of menus.
- Have a system in place to measure the volume of calls. This will allow you to be notified if call volume increases dramatically and also allow you to identify trends. Having this data available to you will allow you to take the necessary actions to minimize delays for your customers (adding more agents, message notifying of longer than normal wait times, etc.).
- Route all calls to the correct skill set and urgency level. Every call that comes into your company is a potential asset – possibly a very large one when considering the Lifetime Value of a customer. You need to handle all calls as appropriately as possible so you don't lose the caller to a competitor.

## **Step 4: Continual Improvement**

Once you've done a complete review of your business communications as described above, and implemented any necessary improvements, make sure to schedule regular planned reviews to ensure you maintain the competitive advantage you've achieved.

## **Conclusion**

Designing and implementing a successful Business Telecommunications strategy can result in significant benefits for your company – from increased productivity to large cost savings. It's important to keep your business objectives and goals clearly in mind as you're developing your telecommunications strategy so that the end result will be aligned with those goals. Remember to keep everything measurable. Implement Best Practices to give you a competitive advantage over your competition (or to negate a current disadvantage).

As you work towards continual improvement you'll set your company apart as a successful organization that is constantly finding new ways to improve productivity and efficiency, increase its competitive advantages, and ultimately increase its profitability.