



- JOHN BREAKEY, NETWORK INDUSTRY COLUMNIST -

IP Telephony — Ready for Prime Time

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If in the near future you expect to be in the market for a telephone system replacement or upgrade you will probably get around to investigating the possibility of IP Telephony to replace your traditional phone system. IP Telephony has come of age and is ready for prime time deployment into a number of large and small installations.

Twist of Fate

Ironically, the quest for converged voice and data in a LAN / PBX environment started with data piggy backing on telephone technology and has now come full circle with telephony riding on the data network. Early implementations began in the early 80's, first with multiplexer technology that imposed data on the telephone sets station wiring, for terminal-to-host connectivity to avoid the cost of additional data wiring where phone cables already existed. Rolm Systems, one of the first digital PBX makers, then introduced data terminal interfaces on their PBX and phone sets, and Nortel soon followed. All would have been won if it hadn't been for the dreaded Ethernet and IP protocols that then ground convergence to a halt.

By the turn of the century (2000) the data network manufacturers were looking for new ways to expand their market. There had been success in integrating voice and data in the WAN environment through Frame Relay and other associated technologies (commonly referred to Voice over IP) so it was inevitable that this success could be duplicated into the LAN.

Vendor's Score Card — What are the Choices?

Convergence happened in the boardroom before it happened in the lab. Network suppliers started buying small PBX companies and telephone manufacturers reciprocated, buying up networking companies. Then each tackled their own strategies on how they were going to approach the market. While a number of manufacturers have added IP telephone solutions to their product mix, there are principally 3 leaders in the North American market place: 3Com, Cisco Systems and Nortel.

3Com was the first into the market place with a reliable, working solution. 3Com took a small systems PBX (less than 100 users) and put an Ethernet front end on it and launched their NBX series. This eliminated a lot of integration problems and avoided them having to reinvent the wheel. While today they have added capacity to handle larger environments, the focus on higher level, application integration has been limited in the use of legacy technology in their core engine. With 3Com's abrupt exit from the enterprise data market one has to be concerned with their long-term commitment to this newer technology.

Cisco took a different route, deciding to reengineer the front end and back end of the PBX into an all-new IP telephony. Beta models suffered from error prone software and slowed the roll out of their solution. Cisco also made an important decision to enter the market with a large enterprise solution that also delayed their entrance into

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the market until mid last year. This direction made sense since their core market was the large enterprise customer. Cisco has made a major commitment to introducing complimentary software to add in the integration of seamless voice and data systems.

Nortel followed a similar path as 3Com, targeting the smaller market with the hope of converting their large install base of Norstar Key Systems (PBX). Nortel's product direction has not been as clear as the other two, perhaps because they erode a traditional PBX market that they enjoyed dominance in for so many years. Their acquisition of companies has not gone as well as hoped and these missteps have slowed their move into this new market.

Good Planning and Business Case Analysis are Essential for Success

It's easy to fall in love with the newness and "cool" that is associated with any new technology. IP telephony is no exception. Buyers have to be careful of not falling into the trap of jumping at the technology before they assess the benefits and payback. I have seen a number of cases where customers have gone out to procure an IP telephony solution before they have done their homework only to be surprised at its cost over a traditional phone system. The result is often that their time runs out and they are left to buy the older technology by default.

Converged technology and IP Telephony in particular, is a productivity enhancement tool and needs to be addressed as such.

While it often costs more to purchase, it has the opportunity to improve operational efficiencies if evaluated and deployed properly. It is not a replacement for a PBX. It is a step forward to reorganizing work patterns and information flow.

The best way to approach a purchase of IP Telephony is to conduct a study and analysis of current patterns of information usage, looking for repetitive patterns within job categories. Next is to overlay the quick and customized access to data records that IP Telephony can provide. Once this is done you can then see where processes can be eliminated or reduced so that functional reengineering can take place. This is not unlike the reengineering that took place when organizations introduced Automated Attendant and Automated Call Distribution (ACD) in the past. Having done this you can undertake to build a business case and cost justification that demonstrates that the investment in IP Telephony can actually be more cost beneficial than a traditional phone system.

Don't Wait Until It's Too Late

IP Telephony is not an "either or choice" but rather a "when decision". An organization that needs to replace or upgrade their current phone system and who misses the opportunity to do a proper evaluation may have to wait another 5 years before the opportunity comes around again. Don't miss the boat.



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