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# There's Life After Your Nortel PBX

## Table of Contents

There's Life after You Nortel PBX, Lots of Life.....	2
There's Life After Nortel, and There's Life After Nortel.....	4
The Path of Least Resistance when Moving on from Nortel.....	6
Other Paths to Follow when Moving on from Nortel.....	8

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## There's Life after Your Nortel PBX - Lots of Life

If you're currently using a Nortel PBX, this article is for you. All good things must come to an end, and sadly, that came for Nortel some time ago. Whether you're ready to move on now or just starting to think about it, that time come for you, probably sooner than later.

The good news is that you're coming from terra firma, as Nortel had long been the gold standard in business telephony. Even though the company, as you remember it is no more, their phone systems are still in widespread use. Before things imploded around 2009, they were one of the most blue chip names in technology. Nortel was on par with Cisco and Avaya, and back then, Microsoft was a software company, Google was in the online search business, and Apple was a computer company.

### What happened?

A lot has changed, and Nortel isn't the only giant to disappear in the wake of unprecedented disruption, brought on mainly by the Internet.

Nortel made a solid transition from PBX to IP PBX – as did all the other telephony vendors, but that was really just the first step for the transformation needed to keep up with the times.

As you may know, Nortel was divvied up and sold off in pieces by line of business. The carrier business went to Genband, wireless went to Ericsson, metro Ethernet went to Ciena, and enterprise telephony went to their natural rival, Avaya. These various paths are worth noting, since the PBX may not be the only vestige of Nortel being used in your business.

Coming back to the PBX, however, it's likely that you're being supported directly by Avaya or one of their channel partners. This actually creates another layer of potential concern given Avaya's financial health. In some regards, they are following in Nortel's footsteps and there is widespread concern about their long term viability.

That aside, your concern is the phone system and what's best for your business. As Nortel's telephony portfolio became integrated into Avaya's product line, the Nortel brand has largely passed on, and Avaya will only continue supporting these systems for so long.

Whatever the state of your Nortel phone system, its days are numbered, unless you're prepared to keep things going patchwork-style by scavenging the aftermarket for parts.

### Where to go from here?

You can only keep that going for so long, and no matter how attached you are to Nortel, rest assured there are plenty of worthy successors – and probably for a lot less money. Before even considering that, you should know that your Nortel phone system will likely be easy to dispose of. There will always be some players in the channel ecosystem who want these for

parts, while others will have buyers for retrofitted Nortel systems.

More importantly, the telephony space has evolved since Nortel went down in 2009, and if you think nothing better has come along it's time to rethink things. In terms of hardware, that may well be true, but today, telephony is predominantly software, and is increasingly becoming cloud-based. This means that the value of business telephony is no longer built around the phone system.

Had Nortel survived, they would have gone down this path as well. Some of their competitors moved more quickly, and are still in the game. Just the same, this technology changes constantly, meaning that new vendors have emerged to fill Nortel's shoes that could not have done so if telephony was still hardware-based.

In short, there's more than one way to do enterprise-grade telephony, and today's options are less costly than a Nortel system, as well as being comparable in quality. As such, even if you still feel your Nortel is the best phone system ever, there are definitely choices available today whereby you'd be giving up little if anything.

Those choices need to be explored, so if you're ready to start considering life after Nortel, stay with me as this series continues in my next article.

## There's Life After Nortel, and There's Life After Nortel

I started this series with a short review of Nortel's demise, especially regarding implications for your Nortel phone system. You are certainly not alone, and over the next few posts, my intention is to present some viable paths you can take, presuming you've reached a point where it's time for a change.

Before getting there, let me parse out the above title, as it speaks to some subtleties that you should consider in making such a change. I'll look at each now separately.

### There's Life After Nortel

Without getting too caught up in wordplay, Nortel held a special and lofty place in telephony, and for long time customers, there will be some emotional baggage driving your next steps. You probably paid top dollar for that PBX, and it may still be serving you well. As such, you might be reluctant to move on, especially if you're not sure whether what's out there will measure up.

That thinking is understandable for two reasons. First, in its time, Nortel phone systems and the underlying technologies were peerless. You may have spent a fortune on maintenance contracts, but your PBX was built to last – otherwise you wouldn't still be using it. Second, the reverse is also true. If you plan to replace your Nortel with a new IP PBX, it won't be built to last, and that's by design. In that regard, you may be disappointed, but that also means you need to re-think what telephony means in 2014.

As you likely know, telephony now is predominantly software, and whatever hardware is involved is really secondary to the value proposition. This doesn't mean the products are poorly built; rather, the core technology around VoIP is still evolving, and it's futile to plan beyond 3-5 years. Phone systems are not often capitalized now, and you are essentially buying a service, not a product.

The good news is that you now have more economical options, and there really is life after Nortel. Your job didn't go away when Nortel fizzled, right? In some regards, telephony is easier to manage today, and you will likely welcome the changes that come after moving on from your Nortel system.

### There's Life After Nortel

Conversely, you may not believe that VoIP and the options you're seeing out there are an improvement over your Nortel phone system. This is part of the emotional baggage mentioned earlier, and for anyone with a long legacy voice pedigree, that thinking may be difficult to change.

If you take a narrow view of telephony – i.e. pre-VoIP – this rationale is pretty sound, and if that view is supported in your organization, then you have another option to consider. Now

I'm talking about life after Nortel. While Avaya won't continue supporting Nortel systems indefinitely, their products have clearly outlived the company. This is another testament to Nortel's quality, and even though the entity is long gone, you're still benefiting from their legacy.

There aren't too many examples like this in telecom, and it's certainly possible to keep your Nortel system going for years to come, even after Avaya's support stops. The installed base is still large enough that an aftermarket will continue to operate for both parts and maintenance. Some independent dealers or resellers will still have a good business here, and there's always the gray market via the likes of eBay and Craigslist.

So long as you have enough support inside the business to keep your Nortel system going, this can be a viable option. Where the emotional attachment and familiarity is strong enough, there's nothing wrong with this plan. Whether or not this is a rational plan to best serve the current and future needs of the business is another story, but many business decisions are driven by emotion, not reason.

### **Conclusion**

These are but two scenarios for Nortel customers, both being subtle variations on a theme, and both being viable under the right conditions. Other paths forward, however, are more compelling, and that's where I'll resume things in my next post.

## The Path of Least Resistance when Moving on from Nortel

In my first two posts in this series, I've reviewed scenarios that you're probably familiar with as a Nortel customer. Depending on your history, you may be in a hurry to move on from Nortel, or in no hurry at all. Interestingly, this may – or may not – depend on the physical state of your phone system. Legacy phone systems are long term investments, and yours could well have many years of serviceable life left. Conversely, you may be at end of life, but still have a strong attachment to the brand. What do you do?

The option I'll explore here is really the path of least resistance. This basically means you will replace your Nortel system with another phone system. After all, the theme of this series is about what forms of life are out there after Nortel. The operative word here is “after”, since this could mean one of two things.

First, your phone system may have fully run its course, and a replacement is necessary. In the second scenario, with the Nortel entity being gone, you may feel the need to move on to a more stable vendor, regardless of the current state of your phone system. In the case of Nortel, the latter situation gets complicated since Avaya is now the active entity. If you feel confident about their future, you may not feel the need to look for a new vendor, in which case you may simply migrate to an Avaya system.

Clearly, nothing is simple here, but let's define what the path of least resistance might look like. In short, this means you have decided to stick with what's familiar, namely a premise-based phone system. This in itself is a significant decision, and actually represents just one basic path. Think of it as a big branch on a tree where you have three fundamental paths, with this being one of them. I'll explore the other two branches in upcoming posts, so let's stick to the premise-based branch.

This branch, in turn, spreads out into three smaller branches, or choices within the premise-based option. I'm going to explore one of these here, and address the other two in my next post.

Option 1 - another legacy PBX This presumes you are ready to move on from Nortel, regardless of the state of your current system. By choosing another brand, this signals that you're definitely ready for a change – but in name only. In this scenario, you're not ready for VoIP, so it's really just a half-way change.

This won't be a common option, since very few businesses will stay with TDM when a choice is being made about the phone system. Not only is this an unnecessarily expensive option, but all the vendors have moved on to IP, so you'll likely have to go with a used or reconditioned system, which only adds another layer of concern to manage.

While the world is moving almost unilaterally to VoIP, there still will be decision-makers who see this as inferior to TDM, and are not prepared to take any risks here. There is still a lot of die-hard legacy thinking out there, and even though this is a costly choice with all kinds of limitations, change does not come easily for some people. In this regard, Option 1 is truly the path of least resistance.

I'm trying to present a complete set of options for you in this series, and am starting with one that's the least likely choice, but still a possible choice, nonetheless. Swapping out your legacy Nortel PBX for another legacy PBX represents a case where just because you can do this, doesn't mean you should. However, every business is free to make their own decisions, and in cases where taking the easiest path trumps everything else, this option will be the correct answer. Of course, this choice isn't really all that easy given how obsolete legacy systems are becoming, as well as how this will really be one step forward but two steps back for the business in terms of improving communications capabilities.

Remember, this series is about what forms of life are out there after Nortel. I'm starting with the least resistance option first, and in the next post, will move on to more challenging – but more realistic scenarios.

## Other Paths to Follow when Moving on from Nortel

I'm going to close out this series with a post about two other paths you could follow beyond the one of least resistance. This was outlined in my previous post, where the path of least resistance involved sticking with a premise-based legacy PBX system. Sometimes, going with what's familiar is the best plan, especially when confronted with a new technology you don't really understand or trust.

These caveats make all the difference, and your comfort level with them will largely dictate the options you're willing to consider. Whether or not you have a strong attachment to Nortel, if you see that the future belongs to VoIP, then you'll be in a state of readiness for change. This brings us to the other two premise-based options, and while these will meet with some degree of resistance, they'll still be pretty acceptable choices one you know it's time for VoIP.

Option 2 – an Avaya IP PBX Remaining premise-based is the common thread for the three options being explored, and within that, the next step is to decide whether to remain legacy-based or move on to VoIP. Going with another Nortel PBX is definitely the path of least resistance, even though the business case will be difficult to support.

While it's possible that the easiest step to VoIP will be a Nortel IP PBX, chances are you'll end up with an Avaya IP PBX. With Nortel now being part of Avaya, the long-term plan is to phase out the former, and if you're starting fresh, Avaya will be far more inclined to make the switch now. It's really the next best thing in terms of staying with a trusted brand. At least this way, you still get a premise-based solution, and the change from TDM to IP may be smoother than you think.

Overall, resistance is fairly light here, as the phone system will be pretty familiar, and the shift to adopt VoIP won't be that difficult. The business may be giving a bit compared to staying with legacy, but the gains will be worth it. At least with Avaya, there won't be many surprises, so the risk factors will be pretty minimal.

Option 3 – IP PBXs from other vendors This option simply adds another concentric circle of change to the equation. In this case, the business remains premise-based, is amenable to moving from legacy to IP, but is now willing to consider new vendors. The longer the history with Nortel, the harder this may be to do, although there certainly were unhappy Nortel customers at the end who had had enough and were determined to move on.

The impact here of Avaya will be difficult to tell, as it's possible that they become painted with the same brush as Nortel. In other words, no matter how good the Avaya offerings are, they could unfairly be taken out of consideration simply by the broader association with Nortel. That would be unfortunate, but to be fair, it's also possible that these customers will be down on Avaya, maybe for reasons similar to Nortel – or not.

Whatever the reason, once the familiar names of Nortel and Avaya have been ruled out, the



onus falls on the business to do their homework and assess the vast landscape of choices out there. This may well take the business into uncharted waters, so it's a pretty big line to cross.

By sticking with premise-based systems, the decision-making is still fairly straightforward, but definitely more challenging than the first two options. Moving completely away from Nortel is a big step, but if the right choice is made, the move will be worth it. Depending on your needs, these systems may be easier to deploy and maintain, and may offer greater flexibility should you choose to shift to cloud-based options later on.

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