EVALUATING NEW BUSINESS TELEPHONE SYSTEMS
KEYS TO SUCCESS

The telecommunications landscape has seen many changes. Like a winding road, there are twists and turns as organizations look toward alternatives for deploying solid technology. Many businesses today share common objectives:
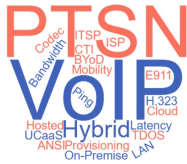
Minimize Expense

Grow Revenue

Implement Reliable Solutions

What's the Fuss?

Today, technical terms are tossed around freely. VoIP, UCaaS, SIP, SD WAN, MPLS – the list goes on and on. What's worse, many terms are use incorrectly, thus may be easily misinterpreted. In the end, the objective may not change, but the solution one expects can be lost in translation. Our first recommendation – keep it simple. Surely you want to invest in products that provide what is needed today, but also deliver the long term promise of scale required. A big key to understanding what you need is wading through the acronyms, and paring matters down to specific business communications elements, concerns, and solutions.

back to basics

Just what is it that you need? Boil it down to base ideas. How many users do you have? What type of functionality is required? How many staff work in-office versus remotely? Do users need speakerphones, color displays, softphones? Are you using a CRM, and if so, would integrating the phone system and CRM provide value? How about call logging, call recording, unified messaging, speech transcription, reporting?

Does your infrastructure support VoIP, or will it need to be upgraded? Do you have power over Ethernet (POE) switches to accommodate voice traffic? Account for analog phones, door boxes and devices such as faxes, and paging interfaces. These are just simple examples of doing your own "discovery". This will help move the process along toward a positive conclusion.

The Vendor Matters

The communications marketplace is full of companies seeking your business. Many are new, many have met the test of time. With cloud based systems, you can find all sorts of business arrangements:

Local vendor with sales agent relationship to end provider. Who delivers ongoing support? If you're looking for a local partnership, this may not be the relationship you seek.

Local vendor with their own UCaaS system. They will provide support, but you want to understand the reliability and scope of their solution (e.g. redundancy, applications, scale).

Out of town vendor hosting their own system. This may be desirable, though you may have to dial a toll free number to get service. Response times could suffer as well.

The best guidance is to understand the vendor/provider alternatives, how they provide their solutions, and how they handle your account the day after it is installed.

AIS Buffalo has served the WNY business community for 34 years and counting. Our technical team has over 100 years experience collectively. We offer a full portfolio of products and services, and the competencies to manage your hardware/software and network needs successfully.

New Capabilities – What to Look For

While 95% of all systems today are similar, there are differences, many of which may be important to you, especially if you are seeking a long term deployment.

Mobile Softphone – Many products provide cell phone "twinning" while others provide an integrated app on the mobile phone. The app essentially shares your desk phone's extension, or can replace the deskphone if desired. A good app will let you see busy status of other users, allow you to import contacts, and let you make calls using the company's Caller ID to protect your privacy.
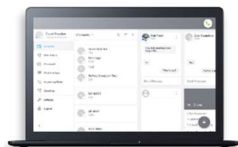
PC Softphone – Many systems provide a web phone that mimics what the mobile softphone does, but also lets the user make feature changes, monitor traffic, trace poor quality issues, and generate reports. This is a great tool for a main attendant, for a manager, or a system administrator.

Unified Messaging – Not exactly a "new" feature, but it is optional with some products. Being able to get your voice message in multiple places (like your email Inbox) makes great sense. You can pick up messages from any device that accesses email.

Speech Transcription – As a value-add, transcribing those voice messages into text allows you to read your messages instead of listening – a less obtrusive option if you're in the company of others.

System Survivability – It may be unreasonable to expect perfection, but you should want to have a solution that offers redundancy should a failure occur. Some of the available alternatives:

Basic: Dual systems, with CPU redundancy. How much time is lost to transition to back-up database?

Basic+: Dual systems, with duplicated databases, CPU redundancy.

Best: Multiple systems, in geographically diverse locations, replicated databases, and active-active redundancy, avoiding down time.

Carrier Redundancy/Failover: The other key area where you want to be mindful of potential outages are your carrier connection(s). Whether you use Fiber, Copper or Coax for your primary Internet, they are not failsafe. An inexpensive way to manage against outages is to look at automatic failover to a secondary circuit. If you can find a carrier who has a diverse connection into your building, that works bestdo the provide the attention. If not, a great option is to have a 4G LTE connection that only is used during the outage. There are plans that can deliver this type of protection for less than $100/month, with failover device, built in 4G, and a minimum plan.

Microsoft Teams Integration: It seems the whole world uses Teams for Chat, Video, collaboration. And while Microsoft also touts a "phone system", it lacks many of the common features/apps used today. So, many businesses look to integrate their phone systems with Teams for an optimal environment.

Unique Features with Appeal – We all have different needs. Maybe you have a contact center and want to integrate web inquiries into your call queues. Or maybe you have the public in and out of the building and a panic button makes sense so you can alert authorities should there be a disturbance. Some businesses record calls, then transcribe to enable easy searches for keywords, emotion, and the like. Some customers look to automate their greetings by using a text to speech engine. Others look for multi-lingual capabilities. We recommend surveying what's possible – you might be pleasantly surprised.

Support

The right decision usually comes down to the type of support you receive. How well staffed is the vendor, and do they provide the attention you require? Do they have the level of experience such that not only can they manage the technical questions, but do they have ample resources at busy times?

You will want to understand how training is performed and provided, how follow is delivered, and what your annual expenses are projected to be.

Every new system has a network carrier element. Will the vendor help manage circuit ordering, carrier service issue reporting/tracking, and monitor plans to ensure you have the best deal possible.

The Local Partnership

In the end, in many ways this is a "human" business. Knowing the people you are dealing with, understanding the sense of commitment and considering one's track record all count when determining the best direction. At AIS, our commitment is to always be accessible, available, and present when called upon. Since 1988, we've worked to support local business organizations with their communications needs.