

## Making VoIP work for your Practice

In a recession everyone wants to cut costs and reduce bills and telephone charges are naturally high on the list. One way that clinics and other businesses can do this is to use a Voice over IP (VoIP) phone system. You can retain your existing phone numbers and continue to make and receive calls from any number, anywhere in the world even using your existing phones if you want to. The difference is that the calls are sent via the internet. The only visible difference will be your phone bill.

VoIP is, in fact, an umbrella term for the technology used by many inexpensive telephone providers like Skype, Attend2 and Vonage. It works by using your existing internet connection, by-passing the plain old telephone (POT) network until the last leg of the journey, so that the call cost is significantly reduced. For instance, a UK landline call with BT would cost 3.91p/min (8p call set-up fee applies), a VOIP call would be about 1p/min. Calls to other VoIP users are cheaper and sometimes even free

What's more, multiple clinics can be grouped onto the same PBX (Private Branch Exchange System). A VoIP PBX is different to a traditional POT system as you can put a phone anywhere you have an internet connection rather than having to install extra BT lines or costly ISDN (digital POT) lines. A PBX allows for the transferring of calls, answerphones, extension numbers and a host of other options and is, therefore, particularly useful for managing multiple clinics.

One of the great advantages of VoIP is its flexibility and hosted PBX solutions, for instance, become possible at sensible prices.

Here is an example:-

*Bob has an established clinic with a few rooms that he rents out. He has a receptionist who works there 4 days a week. He is opening a new clinic in a nearby village but will be using a receptionist just on the days that he practices there. He wants to use two phone numbers so that the numbers each have a local code. He signs up to a hosted VoIP PBX and puts VoIP phones at each clinic, one at his house and sets his mobile up on the system so it appears as an extension. This means that when clients ring either clinic number all the phones ring. If the receptionist is working at either clinic then she can take the call, for times outside this an automatic timer (or day night switch) kicks in and forwards all calls to Bob's mobile and house, if nobody answers the call after a predetermined amount of time the clinic answerphone takes the call. This is part of the PBX system so can be accessed from any of the phones or from Bob's mobile. If a call is already in progress and another call comes in all of the remaining phones can be set to ring to allow multiple calls to and from the same number at the same time.*

The PBX systems are very sophisticated and will allow you to do pretty much anything, some maybe relevant, some may not. A typical PBX system will allow for music on hold, conference calling, call forwarding (to mobiles as well), virtual receptionists, ring groups, timed events and if it doesn't do it you can have a module written to make it do it.

VoIP can also be used in conjunction with some clinic management systems ([www.multiclinic.co.uk](http://www.multiclinic.co.uk)) to extract the phone number. This would allow the user to see who is ringing by matching the incoming number against the patient database and displaying the name on the phone. Patients can also be rung by clicking a link in Outlook or on your clinic database.

## So what do I need?

There are many providers out there who offer a variety of services. The most popular is Skype; it isn't really a business solution since you use your computer to make the calls. It also doesn't allow you to use the more advanced features since it has no PBX functionality, but it is cheap and used a lot by students. Vonage is probably the cheapest and allows you to use normal handsets but again offers no advanced PBX functionality. Attend2VoIP ([www.attend2voip.co.uk](http://www.attend2voip.co.uk)) & Spitfire ([spitfire.co.uk](http://spitfire.co.uk)) offer a more complete service and you can even rent the handsets off Spitfire to make the capital expenditure £0. They offer most of the forwarding capabilities and ring groups that VoIP can offer; number rental is around £5 a number with £5 of calls thrown in a month. Since you can make as many simultaneous calls as your internet connection can handle they are charged in numbers not lines.

The other option is to host the exchange yourself. IT consultants can fit the system for you or with a little bit of computer know how you can install the system yourself. There are many options; most of which cost a considerable amount of money and are almost certainly overkill for almost all clinics. Trixbox CE ([www.trixbox.org](http://www.trixbox.org)) is a very good open source (free) software solution, which has a good support community. It can be bought preinstalled on a computer system for around £800 or installed by yourself for free. For a small clinic you can use the cheapest machine you can get your hands on (about £300).

The phone hardware is the next cost. There are cheap phones out there (Grand stream 101 ~ £40) but, they are more suited to a home environment. Polycom is the most respected and they start at around £70. E-bay is your friend here as most big corporations don't like buying second hand; most phones come from the states so you may have to buy a UK power supply and don't forget the import tax, but you will save a lot of money. You can also buy a Linksys PAP2 that will allow you to connect your current phones and/or fax machine to a VoIP system, although you will lose some functionality.

If you are now sold on the idea of a VoIP system, there are some other considerations. Your phones are a critical part of your clinic and like any critical system it should be well maintained and installed with all the security features up to date. A badly setup system may fail or, worse, it could be hacked. Power cuts are part of modern life and it's a good idea to use a UPS (a big battery) to keep your system going in such an event. But don't be put off, installed properly and with care VOIP systems are secure and extremely reliable.

VoIP is an emerging technology with lots of benefits and as the cost of broadband and mobile phones becomes cheaper the only reason to keep your landline is for you credit card machine and to get the internet.

**About the author.** Dominic Hampton is a Director of Attend 2 IT an IT consultancy company which manufactures Multiclinic, an online clinic management system and designs websites for Chiropractors and small businesses. He is married to Chiropractor, Dr Louise Hampton who successfully uses VoIP and Multiclinic at her two clinics.