



The Big 4: Top Considerations in Choosing a VoIP Provider

**Guidance for Straddling the Cloud:
Relying on Managed Voice and Data Services**

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As organizations look for new ways to reduce telecommunications costs, they are turning to voice over IP (VoIP)—a market-proven technology that uses the Internet to carry voice data. Increasingly, small and mid-size businesses (SMBs) are choosing converged voice and data offerings, which transport both voice and data traffic on the same core network. When considering a plethora of services available from a multitude of providers, there is often no clear answer to a question that is of paramount importance: “What should I consider when shopping for a VoIP provider?”

This brief whitepaper provides best-practice guidance for SMBs considering a transition first to VoIP and then to fully converged services. For more information on the benefits of VoIP and converged voice/data services, please refer to the “Why VoIP? Cost Savings and a Platform for Future Growth” tutorial at the end of this paper.

Top Issue #1: Quality Considerations

For most growing organizations, VoIP is the first step to unified communications. Many providers offer VoIP services that are targeted at SMBs. But not all providers are alike, nor are their services.

Many VoIP providers tout a high-quality voice experience over the Internet, but they neglect to inform potential customers that the traffic is quickly handed off to the public Internet, where it is susceptible to jitter and packet-loss, which translate into echo and static that equate to low-quality call experiences. When evaluating potential providers, SMBs should look for quality indicators including:

- **Keeping traffic off the public Internet**
The provider should carry the voice traffic on its own network to guarantee bi-directional voice quality.
- **Offers QoS (Quality of Service) with Dynamic Bandwidth Allocation**
The provider should guarantee a high level of QoS, using dynamic bandwidth allocation to ensure that voice traffic gets priority over data traffic, thus minimizing packet loss.

Top Issue #2: Room for Growth: Voice and Data

After experiencing VoIP communications for voice, many SMBs are eager to expand into additional unified communications capabilities. To do so, best practices call for choosing a service provider that:

- **Has the required coverage and “voiceprint”**
The provider must have a network that allows SMB customers to access the voice service, regardless of their physical location.
- **Delivers data service, not just voice service**
The vendor should offer true converged voice-and-data transport. This integrated offering results in a simpler, more cost-effective experience for SMBs and should not be underestimated. There is only one vendor to interact with, one bill to receive and pay, one vendor provisioning the data circuit and ensuring voice traffic prioritization, one vendor monitoring the network, and one tech support team to rely on for the resolution of voice and data issues.
- **Supports multiple locations with inter-office dialing**
On a converged network, multiple sites are viewed as a single, logical network, no matter how geographically dispersed the locations may be. A provider of true converged voice and data services can easily take multiple locations and treat them as one network, to offer four-digit dialing between sites. Four-digit dialing saves SMBs money by providing inter-office calls at no charge and boosts productivity by allowing employees to place calls faster. Importantly, a converged network also allows highly secure, inter-office data sharing over a private network.
- **Supports unified communications calling features**
As part of the VoIP service, the provider should offer the basics of unified communications: caller ID, call transfer, and E911.

Did You Know?

Yankee Group estimates telecom expenses represent 1–2% of revenue in SMB organizations.

Top Issue #3: Advanced Security Services—Without Customer Premise Equipment

Certainly, a best-practice selection process for converged voice/data services includes determining whether the services provider delivers network security and monitoring. Because SMBs rely on the free flow of voice and data, these customers need assurance that their circuits are safeguarded from security threats—such as viruses and spam—and protected from network outages. Therefore, the managed services provider should:

- **Proactively monitor the network**

The services provider should support and proactively monitor its data, voice, and security services on a 24 / 7 / 365 basis from multiple redundant network and security operations centers. Dedicated support and infrastructure ensure that the network services perform to their maximum potential, and customers receive the best technical support available.

- **Delivers network-based security**

The most advanced converged voice/data services are protected by managed security services that do not require customer premise equipment (CPE). The managed security services should provide a multi-layer security approach that delivers holistic protection from individual and blended threats, as well as coordinated security alerting, logging, and reporting. Components—all of which are managed and maintained by the provider, in the network cloud—should include:

- o Managed firewall
- o Intrusion protection
- o Anti-virus/anti-spyware protection
- o Anti-spam protection
- o Web filtering, including white list / black list and content filtering
- o Personal protection suite

Top Issue #4: Choose a Provider That Can Meet the Needs of SMBs

The chosen services provider should deliver more than just a high-performance, highly secure converged voice/data network. It should be resourced to meet the needs of SMBs and have a customer focus that goes beyond offering all customers a “cookie cutter” solution. Large carriers often sell their services to SMBs, but because they are fundamentally oriented to work with an enterprise customer base, they neglect SMBs by default. For SMBs and growing organizations with little to no dedicated IT staff, turning over critical voice and data communications reliance to a large carrier is a potentially flawed strategy. Conversely, small local carriers may offer VoIP service but lack the network or customer service infrastructure to scale the customer’s converged

solution to meet future needs. Key criteria to look for when choosing a provider include:

- **Delivering VoIP with existing telephony equipment**

Many SMBs make the switch from traditional telephony to converged voice and data by starting with VoIP. The provider should be able to deliver Internet-based voice connectivity using the SMB's existing phones, i.e., not requiring the capex of new VoIP phones or switches.

- **Provides professional services, including project management**

It is highly desirable for the provider to have a professional services organization that has strong, dedicated expertise in technical issues, service delivery, change management, and project management. As sold to the SMB, the service itself may be high quality—but a smooth deployment is also essential, particularly for small IT organizations, which are typically under-resourced.

- **Is flexible and scalable**

At any point during the service relationship, the service provider should be flexible and able to easily scale the service to include new capabilities—such as PCI compliance for retail credit card transactions—and new services—such as advanced security.

At any time, SMB customers should be able to choose the number of lines, speed of data, and long distance bundle packages that meet their current and future needs. Customers should not be forced into selecting pre-determined packages that give them more services than they need. SMBs should not be obligated to pay additional fees for standard services that the provider may consider to be add-ons—such as voicemail, hunt groups, and white page listings.

MegaPath Delivers Converged Voice and Data Services Designed for SMBs

MegaPath provides converged voice and data services that meet all of the best practices above. MegaPath Hosted Voice service fully integrates with customers' existing or newly purchased phone equipment and supports for analog, digital (PRI), or SIP-enabled-IP PBXs to provide high-quality, reliable voice and data service that is managed through our own secure private network.

In addition, most MegaPath customers reduce their current telecommunications costs by 30–50% by switching to a Hosted Voice-managed voice and data solution. Resourced to meet the needs of SMBs, as well as larger enterprises, MegaPath is the only carrier to provide an all-in-one solution serving the needs of multi-location offices with data, voice, and managed security over an advanced MPLS network.

Tutorial: Why VoIP? Cost Savings and a Platform for Growth

Cost savings are a clear benefit of VoIP services; this savings is the initial reason many SMB decision-makers are attracted to them. Simply put, by using Internet Protocol (IP) services to carry voice traffic, SMB users are no longer required to use traditional carriers' toll lines for local or long-distance service. Long-distance telephone bills drop off the company budget and are typically replaced with a VoIP carrier's monthly fixed fee for all voice communications.

However, the real value of VoIP technology is in the network's ability to carry combined voice and data. This is called network convergence and is the foundation for unified communications—the integrated delivery of voice, data and video communications. Unified communications can help SMBs accomplish four critical goals:

- Improve employee productivity by allowing people to communicate more freely and efficiently
- Integrate communications into business processes
- Simplify operations by connecting people and information more effectively
- Reduce capital and operating expenditures

Unified communications typically include:

- Unified messaging that boosts productivity and streamlines daily communications tasks with a single inbox for email, voicemail, and faxes.
- Desktop applications that give point-and-click access to call-handling capabilities—such as viewing incoming calls on-screen and either picking them up or sending them to voicemail—and unified messaging.
- Operator console that allows an entire call answering workload (live operator and automated attendant) to be centralized.
- Additional specialized business applications—such as E911 capability—and integration with popular CRM applications—such as Salesforce®.

Next Steps

Go to <http://www.megapath.com/presentations/duet.cfm> to view a 3-minute online demo of how MegaPath Duet integrated voice and data services work.

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