

Traditional desktop phone a dinosaur in digital world

TECH SUPPORT
BY GERRY BLACKWELL

For lawyers at McMillan Binch Mendelsohn LLP in Toronto, making a phone call is no longer a simple matter of picking up the phone and dialing a number. It's actually easier than that.

The trouble with the old, supposedly simple way of calling was that half the time you didn't know the number of the person you wanted to reach. For the McMillan Binch lawyers, it doesn't matter where they are or what phone they're using, they always have access to the firm's carefully managed and always up-to-date database of 70,000 contacts.

The firm's sophisticated phone system required cutting-edge integration of three different technologies: the Cisco VoIP (voice over Internet protocol) PBX, which the firm installed two years ago, the ContactEase customer relationship management (CRM) system McMillan Binch has been using for almost 10 years, and a BlackBerry Enterprise Server, also installed about two years ago.

Adopting VoIP, which uses local area network cables to carry phone calls within the office, was the starting point. McMillan Binch was one of the first law firms in Canada, if not the first, to jump on the VoIP bandwagon, says Chris Duncan, director of information technology at the law firm. Because the Cisco phone switch is really just one more Internet protocol computer application

on the network, it was relatively easy to integrate it with other applications, including the ContactEase CRM system.

The VoIP decision was not an easy one, though, Duncan says. McMillan Binch was moving offices in Toronto two years ago and it became clear that sticking with the firm's 15-year-old Rolm PBX was not a good option, as it was difficult to maintain. The question was whether to take a chance on VoIP. It was a big investment — about \$700,000 for a system that would support more than 500 phones — but Duncan pressed for VoIP.

"I viewed [buying a conventional phone system] as a step in the wrong direction," he says. "Traditional PBXs were obviously eventually going to die. Why buy old technology?"

The benefits outweighed the risks. For starters, VoIP simplifies management. Now the firm's IT department is only managing one physical network instead of two. Also, adding, moving, or changing an extension — something that happens almost every week in some big firms — no longer requires bringing in service people to change wires. It can all be done in software from a computer console by in-house IT personnel.

Another key benefit Duncan stressed to partners was the ability to set up the VoIP system so lawyers could use it wherever they were, just as if they were

in the office. Cisco's softphone technology is PC software that lets a computer function as a VoIP phone. Users simply plug a telephone headset into a USB port on the computer. Or at home, they could plug a regular phone into a special network router.

With high-speed Internet access and a virtual private network connection back to the office to ensure security, lawyers can use their computers or home VoIP phones as if they were in the office. If someone dials their office extension, for example, it will ring on their computer while they're sitting in an airport lounge.

It ultimately makes lawyers more accessible, Duncan says. "You're no longer having to forward your line or give out multiple numbers. You can just say, 'Call me at my office, I'm always there.' And it appears as if you are always there. Even if you're working out of the office for a month."

Also important was the ability of VoIP to integrate the phone system with other applications in ways that simply were not possible with traditional phone technology. The opportunity to integrate the ContactEase CRM system was particularly appealing.

CRM software has become an essential tool in large and medium enterprises, and even very small businesses are adopting

it now. The technology evolved from early contact management tools. CRM systems can store not just basic data such as name, address, and phone number, but buying and contact histories as well.


The legal industry, not surprisingly, has lagged others in adopting CRM, but at McMillan Binch, ContactEase has become a strategic tool. Everybody in the firm uses it to store contact information. Computers in the firm are automatically synchronized with the CRM system so that new contacts entered on a lawyer's desktop PC or laptop are added to the firm database. The IT department employs full-time administrators to ensure the database is accurate and duplicates are eliminated.

Duncan's group could have made any of the information in the ContactEase system available on the phone system, but it deemed that only name, company name, and phone number were really needed.

The clincher for McMillan Binch was the VoIP system's ease of use. "Lawyers hate change," Duncan notes. The firm's lawyers all knew how to perform basic functions on the old Rolm system — deleting messages and transferring calls, for example. They didn't want to have to go through a difficult learning process just to be able to use new phones. "Any new system would have to be feature-rich," Duncan says, "but also very simple to use."

Even though the firm's local area network infrastructure was all Cisco, Duncan's group looked at different VoIP systems. All major phone system vendors have VoIP PBXs today. Cisco won out easily, he says, partly because of its ease of use. The Cisco phone interface makes using basic functions very intuitive.

"It didn't require a lot of training. In fact we stopped doing the training after awhile because it just wasn't necessary."

Making calls the old way may still sound easier — pick up phone, dial, talk — but that's only if you have every number you'll ever want to dial stored in the Rolodex between your ears. Not many of us have that much biological hard disk space. 



www.colevalley.com • 1-800-447-1712 • sales@colevalley.com