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Business

SMALL BUSINESS PHONE SOLUTION
BUSINESS VOIP BUYERS GUIDE

9
QUESTIONS EVERY SMALL BUSINESS OWNER SHOULD ASK

INTRODUCTION

Business VoIP: Bold Options and New Possibilities

Today's small businesses have extensive options for selecting a business phone system, particularly now that cloud-hosted VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) solutions are so prominent in the marketplace. Especially now, businesses can upgrade to a more capable system and actually save money—so some smart shopping is absolutely worth the effort.

This Business VoIP Buyers Guide helps small business owners compare and select the right business phone system by asking important and revealing questions, including:

Ready for a Better Business Phone Solution?

The business phone landscape has changed forever, and it's a perfect time for business owners to explore their options. Contact a Vonage representative at **1.877.862.2562** to learn more about our cloud-hosted small business phone solution.

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A FOUNDATIONAL FIRST CHOICE

1. TRADITIONAL SERVICE OR HOSTED VOIP SERVICE FOR BUSINESS?

For many businesses, the first decision usually hinges on the choice between: (1) a traditional phone system, and (2) a cloud-hosted VoIP phone system. Clearly, the technology between these solutions differs greatly and shoppers should be prepared to make this fundamental choice.

Wireline Connection vs. High-speed Internet. Traditional wireline service has been in place for decades—the legacy technology that runs over telephone wires. Cloud-hosted VoIP systems connect over high-speed Internet and have rapidly gained popularity among businesses of all sizes.

Cloud-hosted vs. On-premise. Cloud-based VoIP providers host the business phone system's nerve center—the feature-enabling PBX —in the cloud. Traditional providers install and maintain their PBX on premise at each customer's office. (Note: Some VoIP business providers do provide on-premise hosting, but this model is becoming less popular in part due to hardware/maintenance costs.)

Over the last decade, the convergence of business VoIP technology and cloud hosting has revolutionized the business phone landscape. Cloud-hosted systems deliver robust features that can be updated automatically, full mobile access, integrations with other cloud business platforms, and pricing that can be dramatically lower than traditional service.

This revolution means that any company can easily leverage what are normally considered "big business" phone features—and do business however and wherever they choose. A few examples:

- Using an IVR (interactive voice response) to answer and route inbound calls to a specific employee or department.

- Placing customers into a call queue as they wait for a customer service representative, or automatically request a return call when the next representative becomes available.

- Maintaining communications through natural disasters or other emergencies by simply plugging phones into a different high-speed access point or by using mobile apps.

KEY TERMS

VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol):

In its most simple definition, VoIP refers to the technology enabling voice communications over IP (Internet Protocol) networks. "Business VoIP" refers to applying VoIP technology to a feature-oriented office phone system.

PBX (Private Branch Exchange):

A PBX is a telephone switching system that interconnects telephone extensions to each other in-house as well as to the outside telephone network.

On-Premise PBX:

This term refers to physical telephony hardware that resides at the customer's business location, enabling multiple handsets to share phone lines along with a common set of features and functionality.

Hosted PBX:

An Internet-based telephony solution that follows the Software as a Solution (SaaS) model by hosting and managing phone system equipment in remote data centers, accessible through high-speed Internet connections.

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What's the difference that makes all of this possible? A cloud-hosted VoIP solution is in essence a software system running on highly redundant servers in professionally managed data centers, assessable via the Internet (as opposed to a hardware and software system operating in a company's server closet). By simply making changes to the software that sits in the cloud, hosted VoIP systems provide meaningful new features to all customers without requiring hardware upgrades or software for every single business phone or location.

Vonage Business offers a business VoIP phone system that is hosted in the cloud. In deciding to go with a system like ours, we recommend business owners talk to peers who also use cloud-hosted phone systems and learn how they compare to traditional solutions.

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COMPARISON AT A GLANCE

	Business VoIP Service (Cloud-hosted PBX)	Traditional Service (On-premise PBX)
Cost of Ownership	No PBX equipment	Purchased PBX equipment + maintenance contract
Security / Safety	Monitored 24/7 by service provider	Customer assumes risk
Scalability	Unlimited	Limited
Features / Updates	Automatic updates (virtual)	Added at each customer location
System Management	Web-based user portal	On location by appointment
Call Capacity	Multiple calls per extension	Limited to number of shared lines
Reliability	Dependent on in-house network and platform	Dependent on physical hardware
Implementation	Quick and simple	Complex and time intensive

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2. WHICH CALLING FEATURES ARE MOST IMPORTANT?

This is a question each business owner must answer. The key is identifying the features available within each phone system and aligning them with the needs of the business.

Included Features and Add-On Features: Most providers offer a set of "included features" that can be fairly extensive, as well as "premium features" that can be added to plans for an additional cost. While many features are similar from provider to provider—and even across traditional and cloud platforms—there can be slight differences in functionality and even quality. Cloud-hosted solutions are also likely to offer mobile apps, computer desktop functionality, system control via admin portals, and integrations that tie the phone system to CRMs and other applications that businesses use every day.

Updating System Features: With cloud-hosted solutions, features are updated on the system automatically and new features can be added virtually and quickly. With traditional providers, these updates are enacted by the provider at the location of each business customer.

Vonage's Essentials small business service comes with 40+ calling features including Virtual Receptionist, Voicemail to Email, mobile and desktop apps, integrations with leading business applications, and more. (Additional features can be easily added to the account for an additional fee.) The service also includes conferencing and collaboration tools from Amazon Chime.

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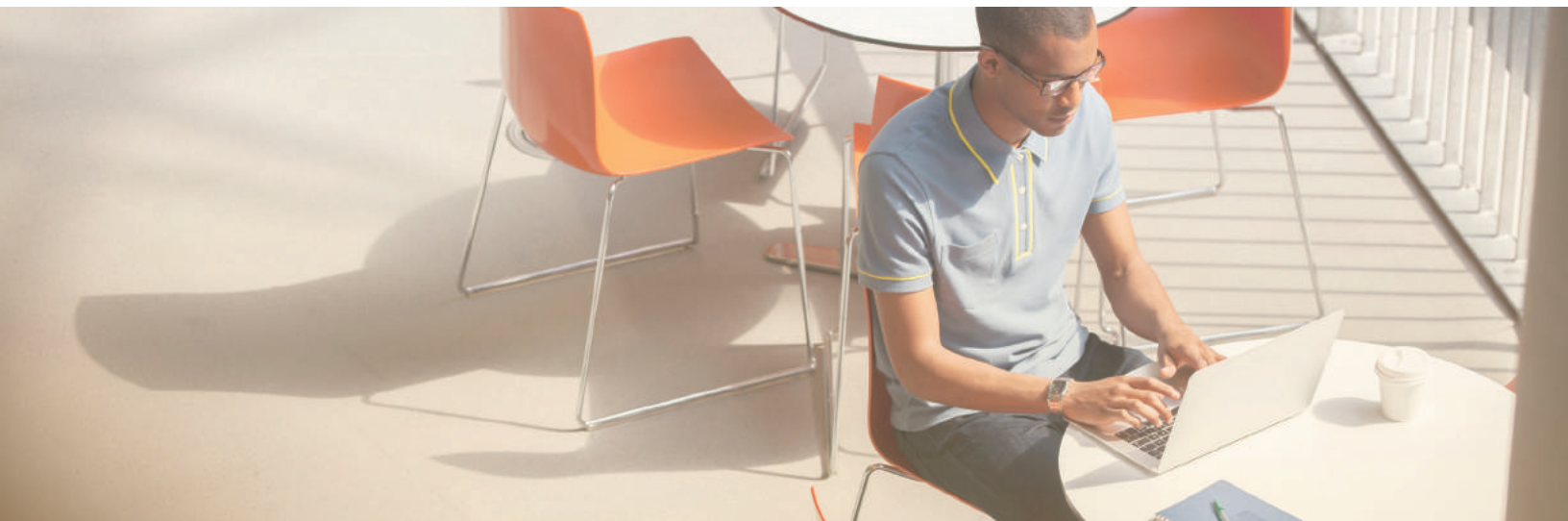
3. DOES THE SYSTEM SUPPORT MOBILITY?

As more businesses support a remote and on-the-go workforce, the benefits of having employees tied to the same phone system—wherever they are, on whatever device—can't be understated.

Integrated Mobility: Mobile solutions are among the most robust and attractive amenities of cloud-hosted solutions. Mobile and desktop apps keep employees integrated within the phone system wherever they happen to be working. It also allows for a more manageable "bring your own device" (BYOD) policy for employers. And when the employees use a mobile app, caller ID shows the business number, allowing them to maintain a business presence at all times.

Separate Mobile: Most traditional providers offer a "separate mobile" option where they provide a separate mobile account, but one that may not be tied into the office phone system. In this case, once an employee leaves the office, access to the using office's business phone system is lost. A cloud-based phone system solves this problem.

Shoppers seeking mobility solutions for business should ask about tools such as mobile apps and evaluate cost, utility, and integration with major devices.

Vonage Business Mobile features include free mobile apps for iOS® and Android®, which give employees access to the full phone system wherever they are. Also, with the Work from Anywhere feature, employees can take their desk phone with them, plug them into high-speed Internet at home or elsewhere, and have the same phone system access they had back at the main office.

Mobile and desktop apps keep employees integrated within the phone system wherever they happen to be working.

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PRICING & SAVINGS

4. HOW MUCH SHOULD I EXPECT TO PAY?

It's true that a quality business phone system is an investment in the company, but few businesses have the luxury of overpaying. Business owners who are surprised by the sometimes-substantially lower VoIP phone system costs over traditional systems should consider the stark differences between the technologies.

Cost Factors: Traditional providers install their feature-enabling PBX in a server room in each customer's office, which represents hardware costs, labor expenses and maintenance costs over time. Cloud providers host and refine their PBX in the cloud and manage it virtually—so there's no expensive equipment to install and maintain, or technician visits to schedule. The result is that hosted PBX solutions can be priced considerably lower.

Pricing Expectations and Questions: Every provider will have a somewhat different pricing structure. Many offer monthly plan pricing based on the number of extensions required, and add-on features can increase this monthly pricing. Beyond plan pricing, shoppers should also inquire about hardware needs and any additional or unexpected fees.

Pricing-related questions to ask:

- Does the provider require term contracts? What is the duration?

- Are setup fees and/or service contracts required?

- What hardware costs can be expected? (desk phones, on-premise PBX equipment, etc.)

- Which calling are included in the plan and which require an additional charge?

- Is there a penalty to switch plans or deactivate add-on features?

- What is the rate structure for calling internationally?

Contracts: Traditional providers commonly require more lengthy contracts, while cloud providers are more likely to offer month-to-month contacts or no contracts at all. The business phone system shopper should always consider value alongside price: While the lowest price may be most attractive, a quality VoIP phone system that's priced slightly higher and provides better features, service, and return on investment may be worth more to the business in the long run.

Cloud providers host and refine their PBX in the cloud and manage it virtually —so there's no expensive equipment to install and maintain, or technician visits to schedule.

Vonage's Essentials small business service provides plan options that are priced on average 36% less than traditional solutions. Month-to-month contracts are available with no service contracts required, and a small up-front fee may apply. Compatible IP office phones can be purchased separately if needed.*

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5. HOW WILL MY PHONE SYSTEM GROW WITH MY BUSINESS?

Successful businesses expect to grow and their business phone system must easily expand with them. Sometimes businesses simply need additional business phone features to support new initiatives or service offerings. In either case, it's good to know up front how well your phone system will scale to meet ongoing needs.

Adding Features and Phone Lines: Since traditional phone providers typically install their PBX equipment on site at each business, it can require a billable technician visit to add a new feature or phone line. VoIP systems, on the other hand, are managed virtually, so adding new features or phone lines can be requested over the phone—or, in some cases, they can be added via the customer's admin portal.

Expanding to New Locations: Similarly, VoIP phone systems make it quick and easy to add service at new locations and tie distributed offices together as if they were one. It's a more complex and costly proposition to expand traditional service to a new location, based on the equipment installation alone. And the option of connecting distributed offices is either unavailable or can require a complex networking arrangement to do so.

The Vonage system scales easily with business needs, either at the existing location or branching to new locations. In fact, since the system can be easily managed through an online Admin Portal, many customers choose to add new business lines or features themselves. Or, they can always contact a Customer Care representative directly for assistance.

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CUSTOMER & SYSTEM SUPPORT

6. WHAT IF I NEED CUSTOMER OR TECHNICAL PHONE SYSTEM SUPPORT?

Most small businesses don't have an IT staff, and even if they do, maintaining the phone system may not be a staff function. They usually lean on their phone provider for phone system support, and the fact is that customer and technical support can differ greatly from provider to provider.

Traditional Tech Support: First, remember that traditional providers most often install their PBX in the customer's office, so there can be a great deal of equipment to maintain over time (and troubleshoot onsite as needed). Customers may call, for example, if service is down or if they wish to add a new calling feature, and a technician visit would be scheduled to complete phone system support work on location. Billing for these visits will vary from provider to provider.

Virtual Tech Support: By contrast, cloud providers manage their systems virtually, with the feature-enabling PBX hosted in the cloud. So, service calls are managed without the need for a technician visit, and generally, service issues can be resolved quickly and efficiently. Many cloud-hosted solutions are easily self-managed, too, giving customers the option of accessing or requesting new features directly from an online admin portal.

Customer Support and Training: Many providers also offer support websites and training tools to help customers self-manage and become more fluent with their system. Still, many customers prefer to interact directly with a representative, so some providers commit to staffing full customer and technical support teams. Business owners should certainly look closely at the level of service offered by each provider for phone system support and factor it into the purchase decision.

Vonage Business staffs a large and knowledgeable in-house team of customer care and technical professionals, available every workday as well as after-hours and weekends for emergency service. Also, customers can always consult our robust support website for best practice advice and videos, and troubleshooting tips. Live training sessions are also available and recommended for new customers.

> *Many cloud-hosted solutions are easily self-managed, giving customers the option of accessing or requesting new features directly from an online admin portal.*

SYSTEM RELIABILITY

7. WHAT MAKES A SYSTEM RELIABLE?

In the simplest terms, reliability refers to customers having continuous access to their phone service. In today's marketplace, most providers have dramatically improved their overall reliability, particularly cloud-hosted VoIP phone system providers.

Traditional Challenges: With traditional premise-based solutions, situations like downed telephone lines, fire, flood, theft or technical glitches can all compromise reliability until the connections and/or PBX equipment are repaired or replaced.

Reliability with VoIP Phone Systems: Cloud-hosted systems operate in data centers with redundant power and cooling, and remain in operation even when the customer's location is out of commission—allowing employees to access the system remotely and keep business moving. Also, many cloud providers have solutions in place to guard against local events such as Internet or power outages.

Vonage Business runs multiple, redundant call-handling clusters in data centers across the country with systems and protocols that ensure elevated uptime reliability. Additionally, in the event of power outages or loss of Internet, our patent-pending Call Continuity feature enables the VoIP phone system to automatically re-route calls to a predesignated mobile or other number.

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8. HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE TO SET UP SERVICE?

Traditional Setup: As one might guess, equipment-heavy traditional systems can take longer to set up because the provider must first schedule and install the system PBX at the customer business (the familiar "closetful of wires"). From the day a contract is signed, to installation and system setup, the process can take weeks. Also, customers are commonly required to purchase a service agreement to cover ongoing PBX maintenance and/or system updates.

Cloud-Hosted Setup: With cloud-hosted solutions, there is really no installation involved since the solution is connected via the Internet. So, it is conceivable that VoIP phone system installation for small businesses can be set up the same day. A few details:

- Customers must have a high-speed Internet connection to enable service.

- Phones are most often purchased from the provider and preconfigured before shipping to work on the system. (If the customer already has IP phones, the provider can sometimes reconfigure them to work on the new VoIP phone system.)

- Once phones arrive, the customer notifies the provider when ready to initiate service and simply plugs the phones into the high-speed Internet connection to activate the system. Service can be initiated even sooner if the customer wishes to use the service via mobile or desktop app.

> *With cloud-hosted solutions, there is really no installation involved since the solution is connected via the Internet.*

It is common for new customers to request service as soon as possible, and the Vonage team is trained to consult and recommend an appropriate plan, assist with ordering phones and porting phone numbers as needed, and set up the customer account. Ideally, new customers can use their new service quickly with as little downtime as possible.

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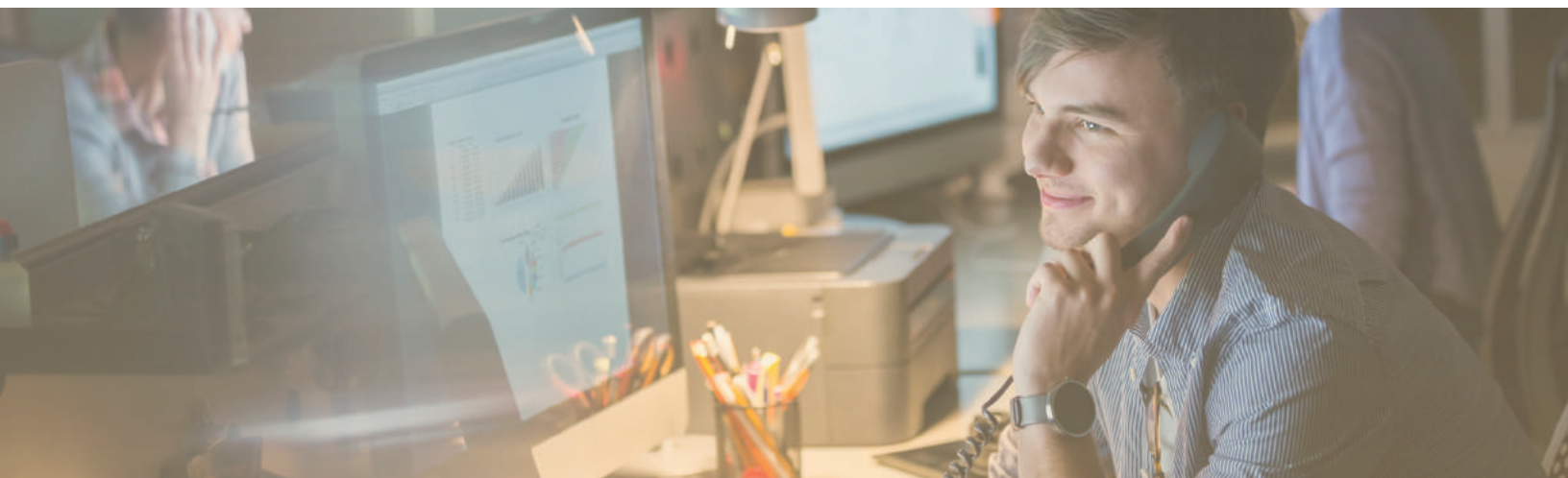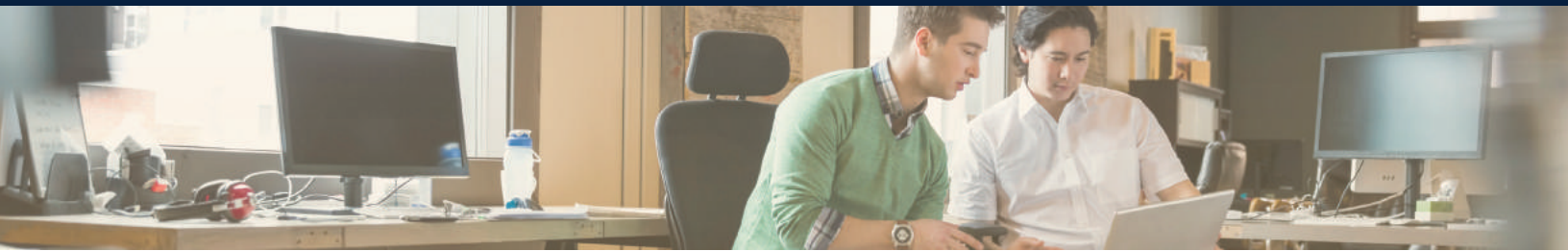
9. WHAT ABOUT ONBOARDING AND TRAINING AFTER BUYING A NEW PHONE SYSTEM?

There's nothing like starting strong. When buying a new phone system, ask providers about their onboarding process and training to help your team become familiar with the system quickly. A few issues worth inquiry:

- **Number Porting.** New customers wishing to transfer an existing phone number(s) to a new system should expect their new provider to handle this "porting" task for them. Porting is completed with the customer's signed approval and requires the new provider to work directly with the former provider. It can usually take anywhere from one to four weeks to complete, so some providers will issue temporary phone number(s) to their new customer until the old number is ported successfully.

- **Account and Billing Setup.** Providers should be able to accomplish this setup immediately and most will also provide online access to all billing and account details.

- **Training:** Ask about the introductory materials customers should expect when buying a new phone system and whether virtual training is available to users and/or company administrators.

- **Online Support.** Many providers will offer online support resources that customers can access at any time. Resources may range from system and feature details, to how-to and feature-installation videos. Cloud providers tend to offer particularly good online resources, since their systems are more easily self-managed by the customer.

> *Ask providers about their onboarding process and training to help your team become familiar with the system quickly.*

Vonage Business assigns an onboarding team to each new customer account, charged with making the transition as smooth as possible. A Welcome Kit and User Guide is delivered upon signup and live interactive training sessions are offered every weekday. Also, a comprehensive support website and Knowledgebase library are available at all times.

Talk to an Expert

We trust this Buyers Guide is useful in your journey to elevate your business systems and outcomes. If you wish to explore Vonage's small business phone solution further, please contact a representative at **1.877.862.2562**. Happy shopping!

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