Small is beautiful for VoIP

It’s one of those statements that people say “really?” to when they first hear it: “97% of UK businesses employ less than 20 people – and there are over 4 million of them”.

BY COLIN DUFFY

Knowing that, it’s odd that small businesses have been pretty much ignored by telecommunications companies over the years. When they’ve been shown any attention at all, it’s been to sell them consumer products at ‘business’ prices or cut down versions of enterprise scale equipment at eye-watering cost.

But even very small businesses find that they do need some of the features that big businesses take for granted. They need to be able to make and receive several calls at once, transfer calls to colleagues and divert calls to their mobiles or home when they pick up the kids or just have to “nip out for a minute”.

Often they need several telephone numbers but have only got one phone and one employee; “I need to know which of my companies is being called so that I can answer it properly”.

They need to be able to work from home sometimes but not want their customers to know it and they need to be able to receive a fax but without having to buy a fax machine or a second telephone line to plug it into.

Growing needs

When small businesses become more established and start taking on employees, their telecom’s needs widen. They need some of the functionality of an automated switchboard (a PBX) – maybe a few telephone extensions and clever ways of sending calls to them. They need to put people on hold and play them music – preferably of their own choice.

Some of them need simple IVR systems – press 1 for sales etc – and even a call queue so they don’t miss any calls at all. Unlike Global Megacorp PLC, their customers’ calls “really are important to them” they want services that help their customers not hinder them. They want to customise and personalise their messages “press one for Colin, press two for today’s menu, press 3 to call my mobile etc so that their customers get who or what they want quickly.

They often need extensions in different locations, even different continents and they want it to feel (and cost) the same as if everyone is in the same building.

They want all this, and they want it to be flexible enough to grow with them as their business grows. They don’t want to be locked into long term inflexible contracts. They want it to work every-time and most of all they want it to cost, well, not very much at all, thank you.

Growing services

Amazingly, VoIP makes all this, and more, possible – a real telephone number, a fax number, 5 telephone extensions, a call queuing system and a couple of IVR departments can now cost less than a single BT business line rental. VoIP is changing not only how telephone calls are made and how much they cost but also who provides them and what they can do. It makes new products and services possible and makes those that were un-affordable to all but the very biggest companies, easily accessible to the masses.

It’s also a democratising technology: just as the internet brought information to us all, VoIP brings sophisticated and very low cost communications to those that need it. And it’s small businesses that need it most so that they can get on with generating over 50 per cent of the UK’s turnover and 64 per cent of all commercial innovation.

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