What's All This Talk about VoIP?
by Dan Kehoe

The lines between phones, computers and the Internet just blurred again with the increasing popularity of Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). Is it worth incorporating into your office communications plan, or is it just the latest Internet fad?

VoIP lets you talk over the Internet as though you were making a phone call. In the most basic setup, it's a computer-to-computer connection where you and your friend are sitting in front of the screen with a headset/boom mic on your heads chatting away while you cut and paste on your Excel spreadsheets. Instead of your voice going over the phone lines, it goes over your high speed Internet connection.

Companies such as Vonage and AT&T take things a bit further by using a standard phone plugged into a box which is connected to your high-speed Internet connection. This adaptation has made VoIP a popular choice for home users because it is relatively easy to install. Since the Internet and IP is here for the long haul, it's likely that VoIP in some fashion will hang around as well.

The driving factor for VoIP is cost. Most VoIP services offer free long distance and nice features such as call logging and multiple phone numbers in different area codes that the wire-based phone companies don't have. Calls anywhere in the states are usually free, and international calls are either free or cost only a few cents per minute. VoIP packages are priced competitively or below those of standard telephone company offerings. Since you're already paying for high-speed Internet for your computer e-mail, adding VoIP means you don't have to also pay another $40 or so to the phone company for phone service. So why doesn't everyone hop on this bandwagon?

The primary drawback to VoIP is the very thing that makes it work—the Internet. If you don't have a reliable high-speed Internet connection, VoIP is not for you. If the Internet connection is down, so is your phone, and in emergencies that's bad news.

The other factor to consider is the voice quality of Internet-based phone calls. Though it is much better than the warbling cell phone sound that used to characterize VoIP in its early days, some say it is still not quite as good as standard phone line calls. VoIP and cell phones use similar kinds of compression schemes to transfer voice as digital data, so it makes sense they might sound alike. But the higher bandwidth that high-speed Internet affords makes the quality of VoIP slightly better than what your cell phone can deliver, and most people either can't tell the difference or don't care.

Some balk at the free long distance advantage of VoIP since their cell phone already has free long distance. What they're forgetting is that while the long distance is free on your cell phone, the airtime is not, unless you plan to do all of your talking on nights and weekends. With VoIP you can talk all you want anytime you want.

VoIP is probably not quite ready for prime time in larger offices, but it will be soon and might be okay for a small office. But, it is definitely worth checking out for home office use. (Note that E911 service may not be available through your VoIP vendor yet, so if calling the police and having your location and name pop up on their dispatch screen is important to you, hold off on putting all your home eggs in the VoIP basket for a bit.)

If you want to test out VoIP just for fun, sign up for a Skype account (*www.Skype.com*) and install their free software on your laptop. Get a decent headset with boom mic such as the Logitech® Internet Chat Headset ($20 street price) and start chatting away. Until December 2006, you can talk on Skype for free in the USA, and even call a regular phone from your computer.

Daniel K. Kehoe is president of Bigfoot Labs in Connecticut. He has more than 27 years experience in the computer industry in technical and marketing roles, most recently with Compaq Computer Corporation.