SELECTING A NEW TELEPHONE SYSTEM?
GET BIG SYSTEM PERFORMANCE
FOR SMALL SYSTEM DOLLARS

Ellen Freedman, CLM
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In my capacity as Law Practice Management Coordinator for the Pennsylvania Bar Association, I am always cognizant of the fact that I must be able to provide assistance to firms of *all* sizes and practice configurations. Nonetheless, I confess that I spend a rather large percentage of my time "fretting" about ways for the solo, small and mid-size firm to remain competitive.

From a business perspective, I see that as the legal industry continues to mature, it is getting harder and harder for firms to maintain the same level of profitability. The small and mid-size firms—particularly those which offer a broad, general practice—are getting squeezed tightly between the boutiques, the mega-firms, and in-house counsel's capabilities. So when I come across something which I feel can assist small and mid-size firms to "level the playing field," I can't wait to get the information out.

It used to be that only those buying the large PBX digital telephone switches—the likes of Rolm, NEC or Northern Telecom, at hefty price tags at or over six figures—got lots of features. Next in line were the small digital and "key" systems—such as Merlin, Toshiba, or Intertel, which could be had for anywhere from $18,000 - $35,000 depending on memory capacity, number of handsets and trunks, and features purchased—which provide reliability and a decent feature set. Unfortunately, these systems are typically very expensive to expand or upgrade. And sometimes these systems are discontinued and "no longer supported" and the firm must bear the expense of an upgrade to another system, even though the present one is still working adequately.

If your firm has experienced significant growth, chances are pretty good that you've purchased, and subsequently discarded, more than one telephone system enroute. And of those you purchased, it is likely that many lacked features you wanted, and most were difficult to make changes to without paying an outside contractor through the nose.

One thing both the large PBX and the key systems—even those for small firms—have in common is that they require what is called proprietary hardware, meaning that the manufacturer's hardware and software must be used. Typically, the hardware is very expensive, because there are no choices.

There is now a new generation of telephone system. It is based on a non-proprietary hardware platform, meaning that any souped-up "server class" PC can serve as the telephone/voicemail server. Becoming brand-independent means savings in a big way. The trunk cards and telephone handset port cards go into slots in the PC just like additional memory or a CD drive would occupy slots. That means you can install additional cards yourself, without paying an outside contractor. And it means the system is highly expandable; you can upgrade incrementally at low cost as your needs grow, without having to purchase a new system.

Any brand of analog telephone handset (which is far cheaper than a digital phone) can be plugged into the system and will work, so you can buy cheaper phones, and have a wider choice of brands. The system is software driven, and hangs off your network like any other device. Most integrate fully with Microsoft Outlook, which means that you can have unified messaging, e.g. your voicemails in your inbox along with your emails. That means you can sort them, save them, append them with voice or text, and forward them anywhere in the world. It also means if you are out of the office you can check in only *one* place for all your messages. And you can make outgoing calls just by clicking on the telephone number in your Outlook address book.

Voicemails are saved in Outlook as .wav ("wave") voice files. Since disk space is now cheap, and getting cheaper, you can afford to save important voicemails indefinitely, and organize them into folders in your inbox. No more having your secretary transcribe your messages, with possible debate later about the accuracy of the transcription. You can save the actual message, without clogging up your voicemail system.

The features available on a PC-based system are simply incredible. I have had the pleasure of working with both Rolm and Northern Telecom PBX switches, and have programmed both, so I know first-hand how rich their feature sets are. It takes a lot to impress me, and I admit I'm very impressed with this new generation of telephone software. I am in the process of assisting a medical research firm in Philadelphia with the installation of the Alti-Gen system digital system. Everything you can imagine wanting a telephone and voicemail system to do, this system can and does do—and more.

As an example of just one feature on the Alti-Gen system, it allows you to program up to four different numbers at which the system can attempt to locate you. So you can put in your cell phone, car phone, home phone or even pager number, and let the system know in what order, and even during what time slots, it can attempt to find you at those numbers if you don't answer your telephone. In addition, you can specify the call tracking feature *only* for calls from certain telephone numbers (like your most important client or your spouse) or specify it for all *except* certain numbers (like the investment or insurance broker who won't stop calling.) It lets the caller have the option of trying to track you, or leaving a voicemail, and keeps the caller informed as to progress so they do not sit on hold for too long. The caller can choose not to wait any longer and leave a voicemail at any time in the

search process. Clearly, this is a very powerful feature for the many instances when you don't want to miss an important call.

For the same or less as you would pay for a "conventional" key system at a small or mid-sized firm, which would offer very limited features and limited growth capability, you can get all the functionality of the systems used by the largest firms, including voicemail, with inexpensive growth capability built in. The systems are designed to go up to approximately 150 users.

Interested? Who wouldn't be. For additional information visit the web sites of http://www.altigen.com/ or http://www.artisoft.com/, which are just two of the numerous choices available today. If you've never had to purchase and install a telephone system before, you may want to consider reading "*Telephone and Peripheral Systems for Law Firms*" by Mary R. Westhoff (item #ISB8582N - available from the Association of Legal Administrators at www.alanet.org). Before you buy, be sure to examine all of your options. Remember that you should get a good eight to ten years or more from your investment in your new telephone system, and it is one of your most critical tools. This is not a place to be penny-wise and dollar-foolish, or rush to a decision.

A version of this article originally appeared in the September 4, 2000
issue of the Pennsylvania Bar News

Freedman Consulting, Inc.
(215) 628-9422