

VoIP as a Business Continuity Tool

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Voice over Internet Protocol, or VoIP. We've all heard of it by now. It's changing the way we think about telephone service. VoIP is using the Internet to replace conventional telephone lines to transmit telephone calls. It can increase productivity while cutting costs. It's a silver bullet for communications issues. Or, is it?

Know the Risks

VoIP operates by adding voice to a data network already in existence. This makes the integrated network extremely critical to business functioning. Think about the potential productivity and revenue loss with a network outage that stops access to applications and data, as well as users' ability to make and receive telephone calls. It is essential to acknowledge and understand that the service provided by the network is only as good as the network itself.

To transport voice communications over data networks introduces new risks. First, in a power outage, locally powered VoIP handsets will be rendered useless unless there is a backup power supply available. VoIP handsets that are powered via Ethernet will only remain powered if the device bringing in the power has a suitable backup power supply.

Second, voice and data on a single network create a single point of failure. During a critical incident, there will be an increased need for greater bandwidth usage, as employees send emails, check websites, make and receive phone calls all on the same network.

Finally security issues are magnified; a hacker who successfully compromises the company network may not only steal or damage data and files (bad enough), but can now also access the VoIP gateways, preventing users from making or receiving calls, overtake the voicemail system, or use the service to make unauthorized and illegal calls that are charged to the organization. Because VoIP is an extension to an existing data network, firewalls and other security measures must be present to secure the network.

Examine the Benefits

The most immediate benefit to any organization that moves to VoIP is the direct monthly cost savings from substantially reduced telephone bills. In addition, VoIP can increase staff productivity and speed up customer response times.

Adding VoIP services also provides your organization with an opportunity to combine what were once two separate systems (voice and data) into one manageable, integrated, redundant unit. Finally, VoIP allows your company to explore new services, such as receiving your voicemail via e-mail and/or on a web page. These types of services are invaluable tools for business continuity, which a traditional phone system typically does not address.

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VoIP is increasingly becoming a critical part of business continuity strategy. It adds flexibility to the ways in which people communicate, representing but one of the multiple ways businesses can reach customers, partners and employees. The multiplicity of communication options, including VoIP, traditional landlines and wireless networks, are key to keeping a business resiliency when disaster strikes. In addition, VoIP takes advantage of the redundancy of IP networks and the Internet to reach intended call recipients, allowing employees to conduct business from wherever they are – home or alternate offices until business operations can return to normal.

VoIP offers flexibility and redundancy options that are a value-add to building a complete business continuity plan. Organizations that prepare to leverage traditional landlines, wireless networks, and VoIP will gain the flexibility of IP and the inherent redundancy of separate voice and data networks, while avoiding the extremes intrinsic in only utilizing one technology.

Business continuity professionals and IT professionals must be network-savvy. When deciding whether or not to implement VoIP as part of business continuity strategy, focus on flexibility, scalability, standards, and support for multiple technologies. Needless-to-say, any technology solution implemented must provide value to the business.

VoIP can be a powerful and cost-effective tool. It should not be the only tool in your toolbox. Effectively planning to use VoIP should include: knowing of all methods of communication that are available to your organization; understanding the limits associated with each method of communication; and, understanding that no one method is any more or less resilient than any other, but used in conjunction with one another are incredibly powerful.

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