

Thinking of a new hosted telephony phone system?

Make sure you read this guide first



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Contents

UNDERSTAND WHO IS USING YOUR TELEPHONE SYSTEM

NEED vs WANT

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

BUDGET

INFRASTRUCTURE & DEPLOYMENT

VENDOR SELECTION

IMPLEMENTATION

CONCLUSION



Thinking about updating your business phone system to a hosted telephony solution?

As the hosted telephony market has started to mature in the UK, the options now available to IT Managers here are countless. This market maturity, alongside the fact that many businesses only evaluate their phone systems every 7 to 10 years, means that IT professionals are sometimes confused by choice when considering new telephony systems for their business.

At Wanstor, we understand business phone systems are a long-term investment, and it's important to find a solution that will last beyond the latest trend in the market. We've developed this guide for IT professionals to help them find a phone system that will meet their communication needs, improve the customer experience and truly enable employees in a world of unified communications.



Understand who is using your telephone system

To understand the telephony system a business requires, the first thing an IT Manager must do is to identify who will be using the telephony system. In most cases, the user base will fall into two categories: internal users, or external users.

Internal Users

The first thing we suggest at Wanstor is to review the existing business phone system, and understand the reasons why you need to upgrade it for internal users.

Some of the most common reasons Wanstor identifies for customers include poor voice quality, outages or dropped calls, the need for better call routing, a reduction in contract or maintenance costs or wanting more features such as online meetings.

The way to do this is to ask a representative group of people from across the business and obtain feedback on what does work well within the current phone system, what does not work, and what they think needs to be improved.

Additionally, we suggest that the IT Manager takes the time to sit with users and observe how they interact with the existing system while suggesting possible feature additions to gauge if these would make users lives easier and if users would be receptive to change.

As well as office based staff the IT Manager should also take the time to understand the phone needs of remote workers or those that spend a significant proportion of their working time outside the office e.g. sales, engineers, service managers.

Finally, IT Managers should take the time to understand the different devices people would like to use - would they prefer a desk phone or a mobile solution?

All of the information gathered at this stage will pay dividends later when it comes to building the business case as the IT Manager will be able to demonstrate a deep understanding of internal user's phone needs and device requirements.

External Users

The other area to consider when undertaking an exercise to understand users requirements for a new phone system is to evaluate the external user experience as well. Are they able to reach your staff easily? Are dropped calls an issue? Are your customers looking for other ways to contact you beyond voice?

Additionally, assess what your competitors are doing well or not so well in the area of communications, so you have a benchmark to compare to.

Size of the Business

The size of your business is an important factor in the selection of a phone system. The wrong solution could mean you receive a poorly designed phone service or end up paying significant charges for increased usage.

IT Managers should consider not only how many employees are currently in the business but how many are planned for in the future. At Wanstor we suggest IT Managers take the time to look at their businesses growth plans for the next 3 years and base their phone system design around these numbers.

Also, as the business evolves, users communication needs will change significantly, particularly over a 7 to 10 year period (which most phone systems are bought for).

Gaining an accurate picture of the different phone users in your company is important so the system you choose has the relevant usage capacity. The last thing an IT Manager wants is to invest in a system that will be outgrown too quickly or to overspend on users who may not be there in a years time. The key, as with any technology buying decision, is balance.

Consider whether your users might favour a desk phone or a mobile solution

At Wanstor, we suggest IT Managers work with their communications provider to develop an incremental plan which accommodates upsizing requirements. Every manufacturer has a different definition of small, mid-sized and large business, so IT Managers need to be prepared to clarify existing user numbers and their growth plans.

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Need vs Want

With a better understanding of the user base, the IT Manager can begin evaluating suppliers. This invites closer inspection of the different features that each hosted telephony solution offers. Wanstor suggests that IT Managers conduct workshops to evaluate different suppliers and the features offered by their hosted telephony solutions, then develop benefit sheets for each. It is also at this stage when the important question of Need vs Want can be answered.

Be clear on your business needs

It is important to sort through what the business needs actually are. For example - what kind of mobility and team collaboration needs do you have? What about Active Directories? Would you like the ability to program your speed dials through a computer interface? Do you need multiple voicemail boxes? Do your employees share desks? Do you need a messaging service to greet callers and route calls to the appropriate staff member? Do you want audio, web and video conferencing?

Thinking about these questions will help with the design of the phone system. Get it right and you will gain a competitive edge as your staff will be more productive and your external users will receive a better communication experience when contacting your business.

At Wanstor we understand many providers will have a set of standard features for different solutions. We believe it is best for businesses to choose a solution where they can grow into the feature set rather than relying on a static feature set which does not enable the business to grow in the future. An IT Manager should also remember that “retrofitting” old phone systems rarely provides the solution they are looking for as well. Moving forward, the capabilities that an IT Manager should consider when evaluating their phone system needs would include:

Remote Teleworkers : Businesses with remote teleworkers have a few options available when looking at phone systems. One option is to push desk phone units out to each teleworker. For businesses who want to avoid investing in hardware for teleworkers, a cloud solution that enables their workers to use a softphone or mobile device is option the most cost effective solution.

Incorporating Mobile : Mobile integration via a desktop makes a user's mobile phone pair directly with a bluetooth interface to deliver access to mobile phone features from the desk phone, allowing both mobile and IP calls to be managed from a single device. Doing this allows mobile phone users to leverage their hardware and accessories for both IP and cellphone calls.

Hot Desks : As mobile working has become more normalized in the UK many businesses are now looking at communication solutions which offer a pool of phones to be shared by employees when they are in the office. For example, salespeople, who are often out of the office, may not need a dedicated desk phone as they will probably use their mobile device most of the time.

A hot desk phone solution could be the answer to your businesses fixed phone needs as each user will be given a unique pin meaning they can gain access to a desk phone when they are in the office. This obviously leads to reduced hardware costs as not everyone requires a desk phone all the time.

Mass Notifications : Mass notification software can be leveraged by businesses looking to automate outreach to customers. Many businesses utilize mass notification systems for billing requests, special offers, and other types of marketing outreach messages.

Management and Accountability of usage : This feature records all phone system activity and logs the information based on data an IT Manager and the Finance team want to capture. Many phone

systems offer standard reports which give basic information but at Wanstor we believe the IT Manager and Finance team will want something more so we offer a range of customizable reports so relevant people can see usage patterns, call logs and call length.

Office Roaming : Many businesses have employees with requirements allowing movement around the office. Mobility through a DECT (Digital Enhanced Cordless Telecommunications) can give employees the ability to roam freely without losing the qualities of a desk phone. At Wanstor we suggest IT Managers look for DECT systems that can support both voice and data, with a single point of provisioning to keep installation, setup and maintenance streamlined.

Auto Attendant : All businesses seem to have this feature in today's marketplace. It is the voice that greets someone when they are calling a business and provides menu options so the call is routed to the correct extension. For instance, you might be instructed to, 'Press 3 to speak with someone in billing,' or 'Press 2 to speak with sales'.

For many businesses this is where their usage of auto attendant ends. At Wanstor we think businesses should be making more of this feature and be using it so users can change language if required or set up a pre-recorded message should a user be left on hold for any length of time.

Directory : Similar to auto attendant, this feature allows callers to be connected to a department or an individual within a business without knowing which extension to dial. Some systems allow callers to search the directory by entering the first three letters of the individual's last name while others allow callers to speak the person's name or department. This feature is especially useful in businesses with more than 500+ employees.

Solutions with a feature set your business can grow into are essential

Audio & Video Conferencing : Most phone systems include conference calling features, allowing users to join more than two phone lines on a call (depending on the system). More advanced hardware will also include videoconferencing capabilities.

As people become busier, meeting with others becomes a burden not an opportunity. Therefore, having the right audio and video conferencing system in place can pay dividends, as your employees will be able to talk to customers face to face without having to travel, saving your business time and money.

Messaging & Collaboration : Unified messaging is a feature designed to handle messages from various touchpoints, collecting voicemail, email, fax and text messages under one interface.

The access point for these messages can be an application that you access from mobile devices, or from a standard desk phone or computer. Taking it a step further, team collaboration applications can provide internal and external communications streams to store and share information and correspondence.

Keeping all your communications connected to your phone system via one application helps to focus employees on the work they need to do, with the information they need available to them at the right time.

Auto Call Distribution : Automatic call distribution helps direct customers to the right person to solve their problems the first time they call. System administrators can build directories to help distribute calls within a business, and they can even set up priority systems for distributing those calls among workers by certain worker characteristics.

For example, if a restaurant company wants to connect customers with table booking staff, the system administrator can use the automatic call distribution feature to route calls to a relevant front of house person.

Presence : As mobile working has become more prevalent, tracking down colleagues has become harder as they are not in the office as much as they used to be. This is where presence can help.

Presence is a status indicator for each person in the system. Being able to see what communication method is available for a particular user at any given moment helps each user save time and effort when attempting to contact each other.

For example, if a user sees that the person she needs to speak with is on the phone, she may choose to instant message him instead. Another user would benefit from seeing his co-worker's status set to 'annual leave' so she doesn't waste time trying his desk extension again and again.

Follow Me : This feature allows a user to programme a list of numbers they wish to be tried in order, for locating them when they are not at their desk. For example, the feature could be set to route calls to a desk phone and then to a mobile phone, then to voicemail after a certain number of rings.

In summary, Wanstor believes that whilst the above features are most useful for businesses when evaluating a hosted phone system solution, this is a basic guide. Only you will know exactly what your business needs based on the research undertaken at stage one.

It is also important to consider future features and the technology roadmap of your chosen hosted phone solution vendor, as your investment will be over a number of years and as your business evolves you will want to make sure you access new features to afford both your staff and your customers an even better communications experience.

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Technical Requirements

Once the IT Manager has identified features required from a new hosted telephony solution, it's time to evaluate existing IT infrastructure. By understanding existing infrastructure supporting the phone system, opportunities for upgrades or replacements may be identified. Undertaking a technical inventory will also help to reinforce why the business is evaluating a hosted telephony solution - poor voice quality, outages or dropped calls, the need for better call routing and a reduction in contract or maintenance costs may all feature as requirements.

Many of these will be linked with technical equipment you currently use, and how well this will work with newer technologies. At Wanstor, we believe that IT Managers should undertake a technical inventory across 7 key areas before making any deployment involving a hosted telephony solution:

Servers : it is important to evaluate your servers in terms of CPU type and speed, RAM, RAID configuration, as well as software and licensing to make sure the system will actually work for users.

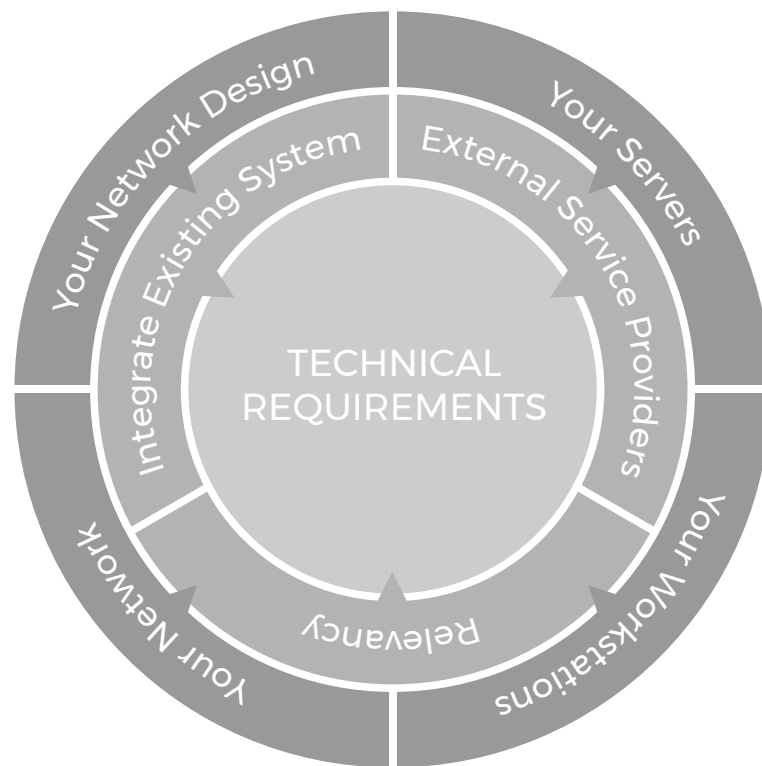
Workstations : how many users do you have? What software and hardware are being used at each PC or device?

Depending on the size of your business, it is usually beneficial to establish a weekly inventory percentage (e.g. 10% of your network) to make sure the IT Manager actually understands what users are actually using.

Network : the right network infrastructure needs to be in place to handle traffic from different devices through different time periods. At Wanstor we suggest tests are undertaken on the network running the hosted telephony solution before deployment, to evaluate the impact on switches, routers and internet connections.

Network design : using the initial network equipment inventory Wanstor suggests an IT Manager takes the time to sketch out the existing network design, and highlight any areas which are redundant or may cause problems when the hosted telephony solution is deployed.

External Service Providers : Some business activities may be hosted by external service providers. Having a concise list of who the vendors are, what services they provide, along with contact information for each vendor in the event of emergency will help the business be prepared for when the hosted telephony solution is deployed. This list may be invaluable if anything goes wrong during the transition stage.



Integration with existing infrastructure & systems : IT Managers should evaluate existing business critical applications and ask themselves - could integrating a key application streamline an employee's workflow? If so, IT Managers should take the time to note where breakdowns in communication occur, and consider the associated cost. Interoperability should not be taken for granted.

It's important to consider physical components as well. If you are currently running an on-premises solution, and are considering upgrading a portion of your network, or of moving to a hybrid cloud solution, you may need to consider whether your on-premises components will work well with any new hosted phone system.

Relevance : In addition to usability, review your current system for relevance. How old is it? Has it been discontinued, making replacing parts and service challenging? Are maintenance costs becoming untenable?

Evaluate the existing business needs and where you want the phone system to be in future against costs, interoperability and day to day operations. As we stated earlier in this paper, it is seldom (if ever) that "retrofitting" old phone systems with hosted capabilities will provide the benefits a business might look for, and an IT Manager should keep this in mind.

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Budget

Probably the biggest sticking point in any phone system selection process. If you have a small budget, with limited funding for long-term support, this will shape the infrastructure choices the IT Manager needs to make now. Additionally, if your business prefers a very lean IT operation, it is likely you will be service heavy and asset light.

In many customers, Wanstor sees a mix of these two elements when it comes to budget. We usually suggest that with any budget size, the IT Manager should look for a vendor who can help transition infrastructure over time, rather than investing immediately in a new system. At Wanstor we understand many businesses will not have a large up front budget, so we offer a hybrid solution to help phase in new systems while phasing out the old ones. This helps many businesses to minimise downtime and reduce budgetary issues that may come up with a full, immediate system migration.

CAPEX vs OPEX

Businesses generally approach communications expenses in one of two ways: capital expenditures or operating expenses. Each model has benefits and drawbacks, with the final buying model decision often subjective when it comes to funding. On-premises solutions are usually capital-heavy with a high up-front cost. Initially, these may be more costly than a cloud model, but they allow for amortization over time with no additional monthly spend. Cloud solutions mean minimal initial asset investment with a scalable, predictable monthly cost model - more flexible than an on-premises solution (and thus attractive to growing enterprises), but costlier in the long run should user numbers grow quickly.

Total cost of ownership

Hosted telephony systems are all priced differently. Some providers boast about low introductory prices but add charges later on - others, a significant investment up front with lower running costs.

At Wanstor we believe the best way to compare different hosted telephony providers is to look at the total cost of ownership over a period of time taking into account business grow and changes in communication patterns by users.

Any reasonable hosted telephony service provider should be able to help you determine this number against a set criteria.

One word of caution is - you usually receive what you pay for in the hosted telephony market. We have seen many customers go for cheap options only to be caught out by in-life service charges later in the lifecycle. This is why we believe a transparent cost model is crucial to a hosted telephony systems' success, as it can provide predictability and ease IT budget pressures in the long term.

Lease vs Buy

Like a vehicle, your hosted telephony system can be leased or purchased. As with any other capital expense, there are upsides and downsides.

Leased equipment can be replaced more frequently, allowing your technology to stay up to date, which can be great if your company is focused on being cutting-edge. But the downside of leasing equipment is that you don't fully own the product, and you will lack some control.

Purchasing a phone system up front can be a great option, with full control and minimal future cost in the form of interest rates and fees. The downside of buying a hosted telephony system all up front, is that once you've invested in a particular solution, your business is stuck with the technology until you are ready to overhaul your system again.

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CAPEX

high initial cost
on-premises solution

more expensive than
cloud based solutions

allows amortization
with no extra spend

no fees or interest
reduces future costs

technology can
stagnate quickly



OPEX

minimal initial cost
cloud-based solution

scalable, predictable
monthly cost model

rapid user growth
increases spending

leased hardware
updated regularly

product not
fully owned



Infrastructure & Deployment

Knowing who key users are, required features, the desired system specification and financial model you would like to use when purchasing, the next step stands to be deployment. Available deployment models currently include:

Server or purpose built hardware

For businesses requiring locally-stored and internally managed communications, traditional on-prem phone systems can be ideal. A full system purchase is a one-time investment, with no additional monthly charges or contracts. As long as you allow for potential future growth with additional lines and IT staff to maintain the network, on-prem systems can be a great long-term solution. Considering security, this offers greater control over the phone system and can be better secured against external threats.

Private Cloud

A popular deployment model for large businesses with strict data regulations, private clouds utilize dedicated hardware and software. There are two options to consider when selecting a private cloud option - self-hosted vs. hosted private cloud communications. With a hosted private cloud communications system, your business will maintain the benefits of dedicated architecture, without many of the IT management responsibilities.

Public Cloud

One of the most popular deployment models. With public cloud, your cloud provider manages all hardware and software. This is the most asset-light model, offering excellent scalability and minimal capital expenditure - usually best for businesses with remote and mobile workers, multiple locations and a global presence.

A note on Hybrid Cloud

It's worth noting that for businesses considering transitioning from on-premises communications to the cloud, hybrid solutions can help bridge budgetary and resource gaps, easing the transition. Additionally, businesses with data restrictions on server location and security can reap the benefits of a hybrid approach, combining privately hosted data centres for sensitive information with public cloud for data, meaning fewer restrictions.

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Vendor Selection

Now it's time to choose a vendor and a device. Below are a few considerations Wanstor suggests IT Managers bear in mind as they approach vendors and evaluate relevant hardware.

Setup & Support

When choosing a hosted telephony system vendor, consider who will install the system and provide support for technical issues. Ask vendors how much experience they have in installing this particular system in businesses of a similar size and structure. Ideally IT Managers should look for vendors with relevant experience in their sector and who offer complimentary training, and a relevant support model in case anything goes wrong.

Design of the device

Depending on your business and whether or not your customers will ever see or directly interact with your phones, phone design may be an important factor in choosing a system. For example you wouldn't expect a modern boutique hotel with clunky telephones, would you?

The design of the user interface is crucial as well especially if you have a wide range of different users across the business.

Will employees be able to figure out how to dial out to customers? Do the desk phones come with cordless headsets? What about touchscreens and colour displays?

Desk phones are now being designed to replicate and complement the smartphone experience your users experience every day. The last thing you want is to invest in a communications system for your business only to find that employees are opting for email or their own personal mobile phones because they can't or don't want to use the new phone system.

Additionally the device should be comfortable to use for extended periods of time. So other questions to ask around the design include - Does the handset feel natural to hold? Is it comfortable on the ear? Are accessories such as headsets or cordless handsets available?

Mobility

With the rise of mobile communications, the 24/7 nature of business and the realities of multitasking have made all is busier in our work lives than ever before. This means having a phone system which integrates seamlessly with a mobile experience is crucial.

Mobility will and the user experience of the hosted telephony system are going to become even more necessary as digital transformation across businesses continues.

Vendor Technology Roadmap

At Wanstor we understand that business never stands still. This is why we are constantly updating and upgrading our hosted telephony systems, offers and features for our customers.

Wanstor suggests that it is important to take the whole picture into account, not just where your vendor is placed today in terms of technology. Always try to pick a vendor with a long history of innovation, who can adapt to the way technology is evolving and who understands what digital transformation is and the impact it will have on your business.



Implementation

Now that you've considered all your options, it's time to make a selection and put your new hosted telephony system in place. Many IT Managers rush this final step in the process. At Wanstor we believe it is important to take the right amount of time to implement the new telephony system. If the IT Manager gets the implementation stage wrong it could undo all the hard work undertaken earlier in the process.

Get it right and the business will benefit from a much better telephony system that actually empowers staff and makes it easier to communicate with partners and customers alike. As a suggestion, the IT Manager should, as a minimum, undertake the following steps during implementation:

- Notify staff of when the new system will be going live, any change impacts and what the training plan for the new hosted telephony system will be.
- Take inventory of the delivery – Take the time to go through all of the equipment, including cables and peripherals, to make sure you received everything you ordered and that you have everything you need to get started in terms of deployment. If anything is missing or does not work notify your supplier straight away.
- Set up a test network - Select a small group of end users and test the system with them before deploying it company-wide to work out any problems or issues. These early adopters will be your advocates for the new system and will be crucial in helping users in their teams overcome any initial user problems which may be encountered.
- Training - Once your vendor installs the system, provide staff with training from a vendor professional. Group training is great for giving an overview of the system and basic features, but it's important to conduct individual training so users can ask questions and get tours of the features and functionality most important to them. Give everyone collateral with instructions of how to solve the simple problems and who to call if they are facing any complex issues.

Conclusion

At Wanstor, we believe that adherence to the process outlined in this document will help IT Managers keep their hosted telephony search both focused and strategic.

Wanstor is an experienced hosted telephony provider to many businesses across the UK. We can work with you to develop the business case for a new hosted telephony solution, ensure that your IT infrastructure will support it, and deploy staff to assist you in implementing this solution from the moment it goes live.

At every stage of the hosted telephony lifecycle, Wanstor can help your business gain more value from its communication investments - both now and into the future.

