

## Talk is Cheap(er) – Article By Chris Spencer

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As I type this there are 4,916,708 users currently online using Skype - one of the most popular VOIP providers.

Analysts at a research group called IDC say that by the end of 2006 more than three million Americans will have switched from landlines to VOIP. Closer to home, Skype has offices in Luxembourg, Tallin and London, and has delivered more than seven million minutes of PC-to-landline calls in less than two years. 100 million people have downloaded its software and its user base is growing by 150,000 a day.

Even staid old BT is offering me BT Broadband Voice. For less than £5 a month, it will route my calls across a domestic broadband connection and give me free nationwide calls on weekday evenings plus free calls all day at weekends.

So, assuming, for argument's sake, that 4,916,708 flies can't be wrong what is this VOIP and – apart from the above - what's the attraction?

### What is VOIP

First the science bit:

- VOIP is an acronym for Voice Over IP. VOIP services do not use physical connections (as with a traditional telephone cable): they use virtual connections known as protocols.
- Voice over Internet Protocol is the technology used to transmit voice conversations over a data network using the Internet or a corporate Intranet.

In broad terms, then, this means that if you have a reasonable quality Internet connection you can get all or part of your phone service delivered to you through your Internet connection instead of from your local phone company.

### Why use VOIP

There are two major reasons to use VOIP namely: lower cost and increased functionality.

#### **Lower Cost**

Skype's slogan is 'The Whole World Can Talk For Free'. But even though who didn't fight in the e-commerce wars of the 1990's know that, just as there's no such thing as a free lunch, there's no such thing as a free call. Or is there?

Well, currently at least, calls from one VOIP user to another (VOIP-VOIP calls) even if international are, in effect, free. Of course there is a core cost for the underlying Internet service. But using VOIP over this service may not involve any extra charges.

And, in general, phone calls to non-VOIP users from a VOIP service (VOIP-PHONE) cost less than the equivalent service from traditional sources. There can also be some cost savings due to using a single network to carry voice and data - especially if one has existing under-utilized network capacity.



## ***Increased Functionality***

VOIP makes also telephony into a 'Martini' service: anytime, anyplace, anywhere.

Less hyperbolically, incoming VOIP-PHONE or VOIP-VOIP calls can be automatically routed to your VOIP phone wherever you plug it into the network. And of course the Internet is the network. So wherever you browse the web you can receive voice calls: abroad, at home, in a hotel, an airport or in Starbucks.

Call quality can vary, but usually rivals or beats traditional PHONE-PHONE connection and a wide range of software plug-ins and hardware peripherals are reaching the market.

Having said all that, many people use VOIP in addition to their traditional phone service. This is often because of the need for traditional back-up and that VOIP service providers usually offer lower rates than the traditional phone companies, but sometimes don't offer full 999, phone directory listings, etc.

Even VOIP providers expressly accept this. A spokesperson for Skype recently said: '[in the same way] email is free but people still pay for and use the fax, we feel that voice calls using Skype could be a free alternative to other telephony for anyone using the Internet.'

## **How do I use VOIP**

My working role is varied and nomadic.

Essentially, I run a division of a software house creating legal software and also give in-house legal advice as a solicitor to the EMIS group.

So I have to be available by phone and e-mail wherever I am and I need to talk to a lot of geographically diverse individuals and groups.

And I have 6 children: 1 working, 4 at university and 1 at home. So I need to keep in touch with them.

This is how I do it:

## ***Work***

I work from EMIS offices in Leeds and throughout the UK, from client's offices and from my home-office in the North Yorkshire Moors. My laptop has a built in speaker and microphone. My two general managers have similar geographical and kit set-ups. We all have broadband at home. So our 'meetings' are often conducted using screen sharing technology (live GoToMeeting) and simultaneously talking for free using VOIP-VOIP. My laptop rings, I click on the phone icon and we talk.

Similarly I can give legal advice to our nationwide employees or those in our Australian and Canadian offices. And I can engage in text chats and file transfers as well.

And if – heaven forbid – I have to talk to someone and pay for it then I have a small pre-paid credit (currently 7.31 euros) for VOIP-PHONE calls.

## ***Home***

When on the road I can keep in touch by voice with my youngest son and my wife. Sometimes I 'Skype' them both on their laptops and we have a 3-way conversation.



My second youngest son is in Glasgow and he uses a desktop PC. So, rather than fiddling with soundcards, speakers and head mikes I bought him a USB VOIP phone for Christmas. He plugged it in, installed the VOIP software and answers/talks when his VOIP phone rings. That's it.

There are some concerns about privacy/security of course. But I can (and do) choose not to display my presence in Skype to the world at large and I can (and do) refuse to accept calls just as with a normal phone. How soon the first VOIP virus or malware strikes me and how quickly the Internet security providers will respond remains to be seen.

### ***How can you use VOIP***

I've mentioned Skype only because I chose it after reviewing what was on offer at that time. There are many other providers each offering a blend of ease of use and functionality. For further info I'd suggest you start with <http://www.voipuser.org/> and take it from there.

### **Conclusion**

Free or cheaper calls coupled with the latest generation of easy-to-use hardware and simple installation mean VOIP is no longer just for early adopters.

By the end of 2004 it was estimated that 124.3 million homes worldwide had broadband access: up 47 per cent on the year before. This opens up a vast market for Internet telephony. The potential for global point-to-point PC calling is growing on a daily basis, giving the VOIP-VOIP user more free opportunities to talk to the rest of the world.

So, the question is: tomorrow when I log on will I see 4,916,709 users or just 4,916,708?

