



WHITEPAPER: TELEPHONY HAS EVOLVED

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1 Telephony Has Evolved

This paper discusses using the new generation of telephone systems to:

- Prioritise inbound calls
- Reduce the time taken to assist customers
- Maximise availability of the right staff for the right job
- Add/retain quality staff with workplace flexibility
- Reduce telecommunications costs

The way that a typical small to medium sized organisation uses its phone system has not changed much in the last 10 years. The fundamental requirements of supporting single inbound numbers, direct in-dial, transfer and hold have formed the basis of the typical feature set of the average telephone switching system (PABX). The costs associated with running the office PABX is typically considered much the same as other utilities such as water and electricity i.e. just another cost of doing business.

At the same time the dynamics of business has become increasingly competitive. Additional marketing effort is required to find new customers and therefore the economics of retaining existing customers becomes more compelling. Increased competitiveness has brought lower margins and a greater need to optimise customer service delivery since it is the customer interaction that drives a significant portion of the cost of doing business. In addition, we have a tight employment market where good customer service people are more expensive to recruit, train and retain. Any new business infrastructure whether it is a PABX or a building needs to contribute in some way towards easing these pressures on the business.

The humble telephone PABX of yesterday has evolved. Today's next generation of computer based systems offer extraordinary flexibility and features that were previously only available on systems costing 100,000's of dollars. Features alone do not solve problems. Correctly implementing the right features in the right areas of your business will make a difference. Integrating these capabilities with other business automation systems e.g. Customer Relationship Management / Enterprise Resource Planning Systems will also bring significant productivity benefits.

These benefits and how they can be realised with this new generation of Call Processors (PABX) is now discussed in further detail.

1.1 Prioritising Inbound Calls

The PABX is a tool that facilitates communication however not all communication carries the same value and importance to your business. Whilst customers prefer to talk to real people rather than machines, reaching the right people faster is even more desirable. Using your sales and service staff to be constantly redirecting calls adds cost to doing business and needs to be reduced. Employing receptionists is a typical solution, however this also adds cost and in many cases important calls may be kept on hold or even lost as the receptionist deals with peak call loads.

A better solution is to have the PABX provide the first point of customer contact to determine the nature of the inbound call e.g. Sales, Service, Finance, Administration, etc using a simple numbered menu system and an automated phone directory. If customers wish to speak to someone directly then they can opt for intervention by reception at any time. This capability is often referred to as Auto-Attendant Answering.

Dividing the calls into different call queues allows different call handling. The call handling for a sales call may invoke alternative actions if the call cannot be answered in a reasonable timeframe, this may include automated message taking or even escalation to senior management. Similarly with

service/support calls, the customer may be prompted to assign a priority to their request and be able to leave a support request so that an engineer can be assigned and respond directly to the request based on the requested urgency. The PABX is able to capture information regarding the call handling to allow management analysis and potentially provide additional billing information.

Whilst these capabilities are not necessarily new, the ability to implement these features in a standard PABX implementation without the excessive costs of customisation is another example of how telephone systems have evolved.

1.2 Increasing your customer interaction efficiency

The way in which a PABX can contribute to increasing the efficiency of customer handling is often overlooked. This is traditionally because it is assumed that only the largest call centres can justify the technology. The new generation of PABX technology supports features that allow even small companies to implement capabilities that provide tangible reductions in the time taken to handle customer enquiries/requests/sales calls. This allows you to handle more customers with less staff and your customers enjoy faster service.

Some examples of the types of features that can be deployed to realise increased efficiency include:

- Automatic lookup of customer information based on a combination of the Caller ID and the inbound number used by the customer
- Automatic logging of outbound calls directly into the company database, whether it is Outlook or a Customer Relationship Management system.
- Direct dialling the customer from within the company customer database.

In effect, the PABX becomes part of the corporate information management infrastructure and contributes directly to realising greater functionality from your existing databases with the aim of greater efficiency in customer interaction. The integration possibilities are not limited to internal systems. Consider your corporate website and the additional services you might offer if your PABX was able to link to your web site. For example:

- Click to call buttons. 'If you would like speak to a consultant now... click me.....' After hours it would change automatically to a 'Leave a voice message' button.
- 'Call this special number'. Each campaign or even product can have a unique enquiry phone number that allows you to define unique call handling for each number/product/campaign. The data captured by this process gives you better feedback on the effectiveness of your sales campaigns or product catalogues as well as making sure the call goes to the right place first time.

The PABX can also provide information to allow service level agreement (SLA) tracking to be automated. This would include details on call handling, durations and participants to provide better reporting for both internal management and the customer. In a professional services business this information would be useful in supporting the billing processes.

1.3 Maximise availability of the right staff for the right job

Depending on your business and the nature of typical customer work flows, not all telephone based interactions can be completed by the initial contact. For example the customer wishes to place an order, however they will need to confirm some technical data before the order can be finalised. This might require the call to be transferred to the technical department and any delay in this process will delay placement of the purchase order.

The PABX can assist by providing a feature called 'skills based routing'. All staff that can take calls are assigned skill ratings that allows the PABX to 'hunt' for particular staff based on the skills they offer and make decisions based on rank, availability and/or location of staff whether they are mobile or working from home. This releases the initial operator from having to manually hunt for assistance and reduces the possibility that the call will end up with the wrong team. Logging on and logging off call queues allows the PABX to know who is available, who is mobile and who is not available.

1.4 Add/retain quality staff with workplace flexibility

People are generally one of the most expensive company resources and therefore it makes sense to look at measures to recruit and retain staff. Good inbound and outbound telephone based operators may be difficult to obtain, particularly in a tight job market as we are currently experiencing. Offering workplace flexibility is one way that the business can find and attract new talent by drawing on work-from-home employees. As a bonus this also gives the ability to grow your business without the normal cost overheads of office space and related equipment and services.

The cost of providing dedicated home based multi-line phones, data lines and integration into the corporate telephone system has traditionally been substantial. The new generation of PABX now includes Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) support. This means that the same handset used in the office can now be used at home providing that a broadband internet connection is available. Features such as 'skills based routing' can be extended to work-from-home employees as though they were working in the office. The VoIP phone handsets support multi-line and conference calling capabilities as well as 'agent log on/log off. Features described earlier such as 'click to call' and integration with the company database will work equally as well at home or the other side of Australia.

Where the employee might need to work at different locations then a facility called 'Hot Desking' becomes useful. An employee can 'log' in to a handset, and have it assume all the identity associated with that employee, such as phone number, speed dials and such. Mobile employees simply log in to the first available desk. This means that there can be fewer desks than employees where you know that on average, not all employees are in the office at the same time.

These capabilities facilitate the concept of the 'Virtual Call Centre' where you have all of the capabilities of a conventional call centre however you may have no operators on-site or they may be spread across multiple sites. A Virtual Call Centre can shrink/grow and be deployed as demand requires without the need to have large investments in office space and permanent staff.

Again, the ability to support a work-from-home has existed for some time however the new generation of PABX makes implementation of this capability affordable for even small businesses.

1.5 Reducing telephone call costs

This topic has been deliberately left as last since this is the area that is likely to have the least impact on your business. Is this a controversial statement? It may have been if you were comparing traditional PABX offerings since this was the only opportunity to bring any cost savings to the business. The potential cost savings available by streamlining your customer service and using your staff more efficiently are likely to be far greater.

The telecommunications landscape today is extremely competitive and therefore the pricing gap between various technologies such as Voice over IP (VoIP) and public switched telephone network (PSTN) lines has reduced to the point that cost savings may be negligible. This assumes that you have sought competitive bids from service providers, including a VoIP provider to get the lowest prices. In the end, your existing service provider is likely to match or get close to competitive offers. If you have done nothing, or your existing PABX does not give you the flexibility of using PSTN and/or VoIP then you may not have extracted the best deal yet. Upgrading to a VoIP capable PABX will allow

you to negotiate the best telecommunications deal, even if you do not find it necessary to use VoIP initially.

Cost savings may also be available by using 'gateways' to allow certain types of outbound calls to go via an alternative provider. An example is mobile phone calls. A mobile gateway can be added to your PABX that basically takes calls destined for mobiles and redirects to a specialised mobile service provider. A mobile service provider can typically provide mobile calls at lower cost than a fixed line (PSTN or VoIP) provider. The PABX does this by using a facility called 'Least Cost Routing'. This tool determines which service provider should handle the call based on a set of least cost routing rules.

This multiple provider scenario may also apply where you would choose to use a VoIP provider for all national and international calls. Local calls would go via your normal PSTN provider.

It is of value to analyse potential call cost savings and how your PABX can enable you to realise those savings. The important point to consider here is that your PABX should enable you to realise those cost savings without necessarily changing your service provider – such is the competitiveness of the telecommunications market today.

2 Conclusion

If you are considering upgrading your PABX then we would recommend taking the opportunity to look outside the conventional application of the typical PABX. With the technology available to you today comes the capability to bring greater business efficiency. This leads to lower cost of business, greater customer/partner satisfaction and increased competitiveness.

Features such as Auto-Attendant Answering, Skills Based Routing, Click-To-Call, Least Cost Routing, Hot Desking and VoIP are available at lower cost than ever before. The cost effectiveness of implementing these features is now much more compelling, even for smaller companies.

Choosing your next PABX should take into account the ability to obtain greater business benefits and closer integration with other business tools such as your corporate databases. Partner with a company that has the necessary IT and business experience to assist in realising the full capabilities of today's modern PABX.

3 About the Authors

Dino Trabucco and Michael Brown are consultants for Ulterius Pty Ltd. Michael and Dino have extensive IT and telecommunications backgrounds. The combination of sales management and services management experience in various organisations have given them insight into opportunities to utilise today's modern PABX to deliver increased business efficiency.

3.1 About Ulterius

Ultrius delivers product and services to medium sized businesses that provides competitive differentiation through the cost effective use of smart telephone systems.

The Ulterius Mach-1 Call Processor has been in development and production for more than two years. The core of the Mach-1 product is based on the popular Asterisk call processing engine which is being used by thousands of organisations globally.

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