



Quinton Pienaar,
MiX Telematics

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IT MAY BE OLD SCHOOL, BUT THE TELEPHONE IS STILL A CRITICAL PART OF THE CORPORATE TECHNOLOGY TOOLBOX.



For all the fancy equipment and sophisticated software that companies rely on these days, there's still one basic tool that none of us can function properly without.

No, not the coffee machine: the telephone.

E-mail has taken over much of the communicating we used to do by phone, but when we want to create a more personal contact, need a quick decision or to discuss something too longwinded to tackle in writing, you just can't beat the phone.

A phone call is often more professional and business-like, and it demands instant attention, compared to e-mail that can be ignored or deleted.

The front-end handset is something we all take for granted, yet the out-of sight systems can be quite complicated. Especially when calls need to be routed over the cheapest network using Least Cost Routing (LCR), when every conversation must be recorded and archived, or when a call centre has hundreds of calls that need to be answered instantly and simultaneously.

All that makes the cost and maintenance of telephony systems more of an issue for corporate IT departments than end users ever imagine.

Absolute reliability is crucial in many industries, such as the security sector where lives can literally depend on a call being answered.

Anyone whose car is hijacked or stolen also needs to know they can rely on the system entirely, says Quinton Pienaar, CIO of MiX Telematics and its Matrix vehicle tracking service.

"Telephony is an essential tool for MiX Telematics. This is because one of the primary services we offer customers is a reaction to their Matrix unit's alarm through telephone confirmations," he says. "This results in thousands of calls a day being made on behalf of our customers, which ultimately impacts on our bottom line."

The cost of telephony equipment and services is a huge issue for in-house IT departments, Pienaar says. "If the equipment and service provider are not effectively managed and maintained, the system will end up wasting company money. Corporate IT's continual monitoring and maintenance of these systems is essential to ensure that unnecessary costs are not incurred, which will ultimately end up saving the company hundreds of thousands of rands."

Critical

Insurance companies rely so heavily on their telephone systems that Craig Grasko, CIO of Regent Insurance, describes it as the "lifeblood" of the business.

Regent runs on a Mitel call centre solution supplied by Imperial Online, the internal IT department for its group of companies.

"It's extremely important to have telephony operational, especially on the client side for claims and customer service. Telephony plays a huge and vital role for Regent," says Grasko.

In fact, telephony is so important that the ultimate responsibility for it has been handed to the customer service department, rather than the IT department.

"The telephony solution

is an IT solution, but the running of that solution lies with Customer Services because that's how crucial it is. They want to make sure the phones are answered in time and that call groups are set up correctly."

The task of keeping it running and well maintained still rests with the IT department, which will also add any specific features that customer services requires.

"We facilitate any new requirements, but for the day-to-day monitoring of calls dropped, who's answering a call and who's available, someone sits there with software to monitor it continuously," Grasko says.

Tradition

Legal firms could not function without telephony either, but they tend to be staffed by traditionalists rather than by cutting-edge youngsters eager to play with new technologies. That means any changes must be well thought through, incredibly well tested, and culturally appropriate.

Law firm Edward Nathan Sonnenbergs (ENS) is implementing a new telephony system, largely to better unify branches in Cape Town and Johannesburg that were brought together in a merger three years ago.

The telephony system was disjointed but it wasn't a top priority as the merger was bedded down, says Wahib Kassiem, head of IT Strategy and Architecture.

A year into the merger, the technicians reassessed the telephony system and saw its weak points. "We went to the companies we had procured the systems from and gave them the opportunity to pitch, and we

went to a third company as well to see what new innovations were in the market," Kassiem says. "We have installed a new PABX that isn't a traditional physical black box, but a physical server."

The new system is being deployed in Johannesburg first, while the Cape Town branch will retain its existing equipment until the first phase is implemented properly.

"Because we are a law firm, obviously the phone is fundamental to the practitioners every day as they deal with their clients. We don't want to bring too much new technology to the table, but the technology we have invested in can reach out in terms of additional features if we require them down the line," Kassiem says.

The new unified communications system runs on IP but still uses traditional handsets on the desk. Kassiem wants to test telephony using a headset on the PC, however, to leave the lawyers with free hands for scribbling notes or typing while they talk. He will test it thoroughly with a small team before he tries to introduce it across the board, he says.

ENS also uses LCR to cut the cost of cellphone calls, and that technology may be exploited more in the future to cut the corporate phone bill. At one stage ENS ran a pilot project with a new LCR provider, but the results were disappointing.

"They gave some undertakings in terms of what will work and what won't work, but it didn't quite work out. It showed us that any changes we want to bring in have to be tested well first," Kassiem says. **B**