

INDUSTRY ANALYSIS

The case for cloud telephony

Many law firms have adopted Microsoft Teams to improve their collaboration in lockdown. They could now drive greater consistency and lower costs by using it as the platform for making cloud-based phone calls, says Rob Jardine, chief marketing officer at LoopUp

The trend towards digitisation of the workplace is accelerating. Communication and collaboration tools such as virtual meetings and cloud telephony can improve employee productivity and allow more flexible ways of working, as well as reducing costs for businesses. And, for many firms, the recent lockdown has demonstrated the effectiveness of remote working – recent research by S&P suggests that 47% of all businesses expect to reduce their office footprint as a result of Covid-19. All of this strengthens the case for investing in technology to support the more dispersed workforces that businesses expect to be managing in future.

The rapid rise of Microsoft Teams for internal collaboration

The collaboration tool that has seen the most rapid increase in adoption is Microsoft Teams. According to Microsoft itself, the total number of daily active users increased by over 70% to 75 million over a two-month period following lockdown. Teams is bundled with Office 365 (now renamed Microsoft 365), which is used by many organisations around the world. This makes it relatively straightforward to access much of the Teams functionality at no incremental cost. Users are finding that features like channelised chat, file sharing and internal video calls make it easier to collaborate remotely with their colleagues.

Using the cloud to transform business telephony

By contrast, one technology that has been less flexible for many law firms during lockdown is business telephony. In most instances, legal

professionals working from home have had little alternative but to redirect their office line to their mobile or home phone. This generates additional call charges for firms, and only provides users with a solution for inbound calls.

Cloud-based business telephony systems overcome this issue. Users can make and receive calls on their office line from any suitable device that connects to the internet – for example, a desktop IP-phone if they happen to be in the office, a PC at home and a mobile phone on the go. Users have access to typical business telephony features such as voicemail, directories, hunt groups and call-transferring, without being tethered to a desk.

The benefits for employers are just as compelling. While IT teams are generally able to provide consistent solutions for all users globally, telephony is often the exception. It's common to find a disparate range of on-premises PBX equipment across different offices, and a different carrier relationship in each country. By moving telephony into the cloud, firms can standardise their approach across all offices and source everything from one service provider. This reduces complexity and cost, while improving control, flexibility and compliance. Specific benefits for businesses include:

- A single telephony platform with a consistent experience for all users globally – improving compliance and reliability, and allowing training and support to be centralised.
- On-premises PBX equipment is eliminated – reducing complexity and cost by moving to cloud-based infrastructure that is provided and managed by a third-party vendor.
- Local carriers can be replaced with a single managed service provider – reducing the number

of vendor relationships and creating economies of scale.

- No charges for internal calls between global offices or for call forwarding – because these calls stay on-net, rather than breaking out to the PSTN network.
- Users can be added, removed and managed centrally – increasing scalability, flexibility, security and transparency.

A single interface for internal and external communication

Today, a common route to cloud-based telephony is with a unified communications provider. They offer comprehensive solutions with features such as web conferencing, messaging and video, as well as core business telephony. Microsoft has offered cloud voice solutions for some time, first with OCS and Lync and more recently with Skype for Business. But by combining cloud telephony with a best-in-class internal collaboration tool, and bundling it with Microsoft 365 licences, they now have a much more compelling proposition. Users can access a wide range of productivity tools through a common interface, while their employers can implement a cloud solution with broad functionality, all bundled into a single licence.

Adding cloud telephony to Teams

In principle, adding cloud telephony to Teams is straightforward. Users require a Microsoft Phone System licence, which is included with some Microsoft 365 plans and offered as an add-on to others. Microsoft's own Calling Plans offer a quick and easy way for smaller firms to connect to the PSTN network, but larger firms typically use a third-party managed service provider. This approach, called 'direct routing', offers greater flexibility, wider geographic coverage, lower rates and increased levels of support. Industry analysts forecast that, by 2022, as many as 90% of large enterprises using Teams will use a managed service provider for PSTN connectivity.

Many have already adopted Microsoft Teams as an internal tool to support remote working. Now a significant number are also evaluating Teams as the platform they use to move their telephony into the cloud

Rolling out cloud telephony across a large organisation can be a complex process. Telephony is obviously business-critical for law firms, and they need to migrate from a disparate mix of legacy solutions. Using a managed service provider, with deep expertise in Microsoft voice solutions and the global reach to support a multinational organisation, typically means that the transition can happen faster, with less risk, and with a lower resource requirement on the IT team.

Recent conversations with LoopUp's more than 500 customers from the legal sector – including 20 of the top 100 global law firms – confirm that many have already adopted Microsoft Teams as an internal tool to support their remote working. Now a significant number are also evaluating Teams as the platform they use to move their telephony into the cloud.

LoopUp is partnering with Briefing to conduct research into attitudes to communication and collaboration technology at large law firms, as well as their plans to use cloud-based solutions to support more flexible working and reduce complexity and cost. This will be published with the November edition. ▶

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