

A Home VoIP User's Experience

AIT tests every service offered on this website before we make it available to our customers. We tried a few VoIP internet phone services. Here's what occurred.

Bob Stone is an AIT office manager.

My name is Bob Stone and I am now a VoIP Internet phone fanatic.

About a two years ago, AIT started testing internet based telephone services. These VoIP services permit you to make and receive calls over a cable or DSL modem connection (broadband connection) using a normal telephone.

My assignment seemed like a fairly straight forward task. I certainly didn't think it would result in most of my family members and friends, let alone many customer's of AIT, joining this alternative telephony strategy. But that's what happened. As a result, we are now without a traditional landline connection. And that can be a good thing.

Consumer (VoIP) voice over IP services started becoming available a few years ago. Many competing companies tapped into the growing number of households connected to the Internet by broadband connections.

When you sign up with a VoIP service provider, and you get a small box (adapter) that plugs into your cable modem or broadband router. That box talks over the Internet to the VoIP provider's servers, which in turn link to the public switched telephone network to connect calls to traditional landline and cellular phones. Just plug a regular phone into your VoIP box and you get a dial tone, just like traditional phone service.

I first tried VoIP with the Vonage service. I was spurred on by the promise of sharply reduced phone bills and I liked the powerful free options. I decided to dump my Verizon local and long-distance phone service in favor of Vonage and started with the phone in my home. But it ended badly, more on that later. I remained determined to keep on trying.

The math

Before I started using VoIP, I looked at the math and made up my mind: My monthly phone bills, with my local phone company, were running around \$85, but Vonage at the time was offering a 500-minute local and long distance dialing plan for \$29.95 a month. I pushed forward eagerly looking forward to the cost savings.

What cost savings can you expect with VoIP ?

Well, for example with a VoIP plan there are no more toll charges that you would normally pay to your existing local phone company. So, you will never be charged again for 'toll' calls. That in itself was a big motivating factor for me because my family makes a lot of in-state calls and toll calls. So, with the VoIP plan, for one flat monthly fee, I enjoy 'unlimited' in-state and state-to-state calls. I pay no 'long distance' charges, even if my wife calls her mother cross country every day.

Another money saving factor with VoIP is since VoIP utilizes my broadband Internet connection for its delivery, I no longer have to pay Federal USF and FCC Line Charges and I also pay much less Federal Excise Tax because it's based on my new monthly VoIP service billing which is a much smaller billing compared to my old local phone company bill.

The challenge

But moving from traditional phone service to VoIP can be like a refugee from a third world country stepping into a Home Depot because there are so many free or cheap service choices. It's simply mind boggling.

Many companies offer similar VoIP packages and equipment. At first glance, it can be tough to tell them apart. More importantly, it can be difficult to tell which services are reliable and which may turn out to be trouble.

And that's the issue: VoIP is cheap and it's high tech but it can be a challenge.

Over the first two months of my test with Vonage, calls that I made at times produced annoying echoes and intermittent dropouts, and even suffered outages lasting up to 25 minutes. My uptime was still near 90 percent, but compared to a traditional phone line, that reality was difficult to deal with and very disappointing to me.

My advice? If you're considering changing to VoIP, be cautious. Look at the companies that have the best 'user experience', and that's not always the biggest company.

There is no guarantee that bigger is better, and glitches, if they occur, may be due to your own cable or DSL service rather than the VoIP provider you choose (and remember, if you go with VoIP, those cable outages that you may have experienced, although rare, could translate into longer than desired phone VoIP outages).

If you just want to save a buck, and VoIP is about saving money, the best deals are with the VoIP specialists like [Packet8](#) and [SunRocket](#). They offer 'unlimited' local and long distance calling for about \$20 a month. And also can include unlimited 'international calls' depending on which plan you choose.

Shop around, compare plans, and look for deals that can get you a free month of service or reduced rates for an introductory period.

Sometimes a little quirky

I learned not to trust the Vonage simultaneous ring feature during my test (which is supposed to route a single call to multiple phone numbers if I am moving around), and I had to occasionally reboot the adapter to avoid connection problems.

I have since moved to Packet8 and have not experienced these problems as I did with Vonage.

The good news is that VoIP adapters are getting better. Early models often struggled when connected directly to a modem, they became confused by frequent port scans and other traffic from the Internet.

These days, VoIP providers ship adapters that combine a broadband router and analog telephone adapter in a single box and this really helps make things simple.

Issues may arise

Many users can transfer their current phone number to their VoIP account. This process is called Line Number Portability. But the process was imperfect when I did the test with Vonage, but is now getting far better. For example, a neighbor who switched both his home and office lines had one number ported over to the VoIP account in two weeks, while the second line took eight weeks.

My father-in-law finally got rid of his Vonage service after waiting on a number transfer 'for months'. The reality is that your experience may vary depending on your location and your service provider. Now the process is much faster and easier than ever.

In fact, my service is so good that I convinced my wife to switch her office lines over to Packet8 back in December.

In summary

One thing to remember is that you may ultimately decide to dump your local phone company to maximize your monthly savings, but you don't need to do that right away. Wait a month or two until you're completely comfortable with your new VoIP service and then get rid of your local phone company.

VoIP has been a significant savings for me ever since I got started with it. Thanks to an ongoing price war, [Packet8](#), for example, charges today about \$19.95 for unlimited local and long distance calling.

With VoIP, it's common to expect savings of at least 50% or more compared to your existing normal phone company bill. And that savings, of course, comes every month.

It has worked well for me even with the rough start.