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Viva la VoIP

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Doing away with your landline.
Photo: *Quentin Jones*

Certain conversation topics are almost guaranteed to find a sympathetic ear: the weather, slow trains, high petrol prices, choked roadways, utter boredom with celebrity obsession. Oh, and phone bills.

Nearly everyone agrees they pay too much each month. The telephone may have helped free Australia from the tyranny of distance, but it shackled most of us to the tyranny of the big telcos.

There are now ways to slash your phone bill and, for those who go wireless, ditch your landline altogether.

At the forefront is technology that uses existing landlines (especially fibre optic lines) and harnesses the power and reach of the internet.

As with all technology, it's saddled with a strange-sounding abbreviation. In this case the boffins dipped into their bowl of alphabet soup and came up with VoIP, which stands for voice over internet protocol. We would have preferred something catchier, such as webphone, but once we got used to the strange strangled sound of "voyp" coming out of our mouths (rather than sounding out each letter), it wasn't so bad.

It's made easier once you realise the amount of money you can save by using it to make international, STD and even local calls. All you need is a decent desktop or laptop computer, a broadband internet connection (this week's Icon Browser guide to broadband will help get you on the right track), a subscription to a low-cost VoIP service and a few accessories.

Get chatting

If you have used voice-enabled instant messenger programs such as Microsoft's Windows Messenger, Apple's iChat and the popular Skype program, then you've already had a small taste of VoIP.

These free services rarely match the quality of a landline call, although Skype can deliver some astoundingly clear conversations. However, they are a fun and free way to dip your toes into the shallow end of VoIP, and are sufficient for those regular catch-ups with distant family in order to cut back on long-distance and overseas calls.

The raw speed of your broadband feed isn't crucial to online chat as long as both parties have a decent and stable broadband connection running at 512Kbps or higher.

To get the clearest connection, both computers should be equipped with a simple boom headset which plugs into your computer's audio and microphone jacks (or in some cases, the USB port). With quality brand-name VoIP headsets selling for as little as $25, it's a small yet smart investment.

It also helps to close any non-essential programs while you're chatting, so that your computer can dedicate most of its muscle to processing the audio voice signals into the internet's digital language. This helps reduce intermittent delays during the conversation.

How it works

Online chat programs are fine for casual catch-ups, but if you want to take a chainsaw to your phone bill, you should step up to the services of a VoIP carrier. Think of these as being like telecommunications companies that use the modern miracle of the internet instead of the conventional telephone system.

VoIP carriers usually provide better quality calls compared to free chat software, especially if their networks support quality-of-service (QOS) controls that let your computer give priority to voice signals over other types of data.

More importantly, VoIP carriers have connections not just between computers but between the conventional telephone network. You can place a call from your computer to any other phone number across the country or around the world - mobiles as well as landlines.

Your call traverses the internet as digitised "packets" of data (all encrypted for the sake of privacy and security), along with the rest of the web traffic - clicks on web pages, emails being exchanged, files being downloaded - until it reaches a special gateway close to the call's ultimate destination. Here the signal is translated from digital bits and bytes back into the sound of your voice, fed into the local phone network and directed to the number you are calling.

Using the internet as the backbone of a pseudo phone network is what allows VoIP calls to be so cheap - all you have to pay for are those "last kilometre" connections back into the regular telephone system.

(If you have used an international phonecard to make overseas calls, chances are that you've already used VoIP without knowing it. Discount phonecards are largely associated with backpackers and public phones, but you can just as easily use one on your home phone.)

When you sign up with a VoIP carrier you also get a new "virtual" phone number in addition to your regular landline number. For now, these look no different than a normal phone number, although there is a proposal to create a new class of numbers starting with 0550 for VoIP services.

Your VoIP number can be used to accept incoming calls in the same way that people currently dial your regular landline number.

VoIP services come with voicemail so callers can leave a message if you're busy or away from the phone. In some instances voicemail messages can be sent to your email address as an audio file attachment so there may be no need to call in to collect your messages.

Skype (www.skype.com) and engin (www.engin.com.au) are probably Australia's best-known VoIP carriers (there are scores more, ranging from tiny start-up companies to massive internet service providers - visit http://www.voipchoice.com.au or

http://www.ozinternetphones.com for a list of local VoIP carriers and their plans).

As with most VoIP services, calls between members of each network are free but calls to landlines and mobiles attract a small fee. To use engin as an example, this is 10 cents untimed for all local and national landline calls within Australia; calls to mobiles cost from 20c to 27c a minute depending on your plan.

You can also natter away for 3.5c a minute to any landline number in New Zealand, Britain, United States, Canada, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore.

Engin users pay a monthly access fee starting at $9.95. Higher capacity business and home plans have cheaper mobile rates and an allotment of free national calls.

Skype subscriptions range from $15 for three months to $50 for a year, with two types of VoIP services: one for receiving calls and another for making them.

The SkypeIn service assigns you a local phone number, although this number can exist in any capital city. For example, a Sydney Skype customer with friends and family in Melbourne can choose to have the SkypeIn number set in Melbourne. Anyone living in Melbourne can dial that number for the cost of a local call and the call is then routed to the Sydney user via the internet.

To make calls from your Skype-equipped PC or Mac to other numbers you'll need to sign up for SkypeOut. Call rates vary depending on which country you want to call, but they generally range from 3c (most landlines including the US, New Zealand, Hong Kong and Germany) up to 30c a minute for mobiles.

It's also worth noting that many larger ISPs now include VoIP in their roster of services. If you're considering moving to broadband, either to use VoIP or just for a better overall internet experience, or if you already have a high-speed broadband connection, you may be able to get top VoIP rates direct from your ISP as part of the deal.

It depends on whether your ISP makes a lot of money from regular phone calls. Telstra and Optus don't have VoIP on their menus.

Many ISPs offer free VoIP calls to others on their networks and rates range from 10c to 20c untimed around Australia. But read the details and compare the deals: some ISPs include VoIP access free for all customers, while others charge extra to bundle their VoIP offerings and other phone services on top of a broadband plan.

Hardware helpers

You can use your computer or a regular phone handset to make and take VoIP calls.

The computer route uses special software (sometimes called a softphone, and supplied by the VoIP carrier) for dialling numbers, checking voicemail and so on.

A piece of hardware for home use is a decent headset. Travellers should get a lightweight headset to use with their laptop, which is a good way of avoiding excessive hotel phone charges.

A more familiar alternative (and one that doesn't make you feel like an extra on the set of Apollo 13) is to use a broadband router that has jacks for connecting a regular telephone - these are becoming increasingly popular as people make the move to broadband and VoIP.

If you already have an ADSL router, a compact ATA (analog telephone adaptor) box serves as the go-between for your phone and router. Some of these also let you plug in your landline, so the one phone can be used for VoIP and conventional calls. There are dedicated VoIP telephones which plug straight into any network port.

The benefit of using any of these handset solutions is that you can use your VoIP service even if the computer is turned off, because the phone handset is connected to the router and from there into the internet itself.

You will probably also want a cordless phone, considering that most routers live alongside the computer in the study or the spare room, while most people like to use the phone in the living room or bedroom. You can connect a cordless phone into an ATA box or VoIP-ready router - but, if you're running a wireless network, be careful that your cordless phone doesn't use the same 2.4GHz frequency as the Wi-Fi network.

Modern cordless phones which transmit in the 1.8GHz DECT band, along with older 900MHz models, will avoid interference that can hamper call quality and inject an annoying background hiss under your calls.

Infofile

You probably won't be able to do away entirely with your landline phone - you may still want it for incoming calls and in case of emergencies such as blackouts. But consider dropping to the cheapest possible line rental plan. Telstra's Home Line Budget scheme costs $19.95 a month (the $13.90 Prepaid Home plan doesn't support ADSL). It charges 30c for local calls and STD rates are pretty savage, but none of that matters if you're using VoIP (or even your mobile with a capped plan) for almost all of your calls.