



Capture the billings
you've been losing.
See how at Juris.com ▶

Juris[®]
Billing & Accounting Software

- Law.com Home
- Newswire
- LawJobs
- CLE Center
- LawCatalog
- Our Sites
- Advertise

An [incisivemedia](http://incisivemedia.com) website

Search:

LAW.COM **LEGALTECHNOLOGY** | Featuring Law Technology News

[Law.com](#) > [Legal Technology](#) > [Hardware](#)

Seven Steps to Bring VoIP to Your Law Firm

[Law Technology News](#)
February 11, 2009

[Post a Comment](#)

Vendors always love good buzzwords -- they can generate interest in even the most unglamorous product. And few new technologies have as much jargon as Voice over Internet Protocol telecommunications. These new systems are touted as the telephony tools of the future, with low costs, incredible features and the flexibility to handle future enhancements. But how -- and when -- should you choose VoIP?

Our firm, [Stradling Yocca Carlson & Rauth](#), has 110 attorneys, 100 support professionals, and five offices throughout California. Like most businesses, we rely on our telephone system to remain in close contact with clients, colleagues and counsel. As we formulated budgets for 2008, it became clear that our phone system needed attention. Purchased years ago, it was a patchwork quilt of components, sporadically updated with patches to fix problems.

Our five offices all had different phone systems -- some overloaded, some so obsolete that they were no longer supported by the manufacturer. As we approached the 2009 expiration of the lease on our key equipment, it was time for a change.

As we began our initial evaluations, it was clear that VoIP was the wave of the future. Virtually every major provider had shifted focus to VoIP product lines, and many third-party companies now offer ancillary products to enhance interaction between the telephone system and office PCs.

SETTING THE STAGE

While there are countless technical volumes written about VoIP, it still confuses many folks. To some, it's shorthand for any modern, networked system. To others, it is a system that interacts with the user's local computer to provide advanced features. Some think that VoIP includes video phones for each user.



Mike Kemp, Getty Images

Related Items

- ▶ [Don't Let VoIP Turn Into a Pandora's Box of ESI](#)

Article Tools

- [Printer-friendly Version](#)
- [Email this Article](#)
- [Comment on this Article](#)
- [Reprints & Permissions](#)

Let's define VoIP as any telephone system that uses IP packets to transmit information between voice terminals and the telephone switch. It may also use IP to connect to other phone systems or to the public telephone system.

CRITERIA

When considering a VoIP procurement, think of the overall project in three broad sections: network, equipment and operating costs.

Regardless of vendor, your system will need to use both local and carrier networks. For your local network, you will need sufficient wiring to each user's area. This includes power for each phone terminal, commonly provided by [Power Over Ethernet](#) switches that may need to be included as part of the project.

If you must replace your network switching equipment, you might include gigabit-speed devices which generally require [Cat5e](#) or better cabling.

Next, understand your existing connections to the phone company. Most VoIP systems support a variety of connections to the public phone network, but some modern protocols and services can enable newer features.

Will you purchase new connections to the telephone network or use what you have? Is your current capacity sufficient for the new system or do you have excess capacity?

THE EQUIPMENT

Many vendors offer VoIP phone systems, with generally the same layout as their basic system. So how do you choose among them?

We approached the selection process from a number of directions, building a body of recommendations and information. We made extensive use of surveys, especially the annual [International Legal Technology Association](#) and [Am Law Tech](#) surveys, to determine which vendors were market leaders among our peers.

We looked at systems that had both a significant portion of our industry's market share and were rising in popularity.

We also looked at articles in *Law Technology News* and in general technology trade publications to see which vendors ranked highly in reviews.

We paid special attention to the handset offerings. While it might seem a minor feature, handset choice can make or break the acceptance of any phone system, particularly in a law firm's high-pressure work environment. And some vendors have a wide array of choices, while others lock you into relatively few devices of their own manufacture.

COSTS

The last area for consideration is the operating cost of the selected system. Vendors promote communications savings, but with long distance rates at all-time lows, these are no longer dramatic.

The largest savings is likely in overall administration cost. To fully realize these savings, though, your IT team must be able to easily configure and maintain the system -- preferably from anywhere -- and it must be user-friendly to all levels of users.

We used peer feedback as well as industry reviews to determine the future cost of administration. We also found the



Software made for legal professionals. Manage your books and your practice more efficiently.

Get Started ▶

PCLaw™
Billing & Accounting Software

LexisNexis®



Spend less time managing your practice and focus on practicing law.

Time Matters® 9.0 Software

Get Started ▶

and bring order to your firm.



ALM
Law Student Recruitment Guide
2007/2008

NEW!

Valuable **FREE** Insights for Students on Leading Law Firms

Register Today!

vendors' own quotes to be telling; high implementation and configuration costs signaled a more complex product to us.

Another cost is backup. Provisions must be made to add the VoIP servers to your existing backup systems and disaster recovery/business continuity plans. Ask what vendors offer.

Server-based VoIP systems generally rely on power provided by the customer, so be sure you have adequate power to support the telephones and POE switches.

WADING THROUGH IT ALL

To help with our analysis, we built a spreadsheet for key criteria. Helpfully, each vendor offered ready-made spreadsheets that could be easily customized to our situation. But they were hopelessly crowded with hundreds of criteria that were not important to us, so we simply used one as a starting point.

We distilled the overall process down into the following seven steps:

- 1. Understand underlying technologies and jargon, or partner with someone who does.** The sheer number of acronyms and buzzwords is dizzying, but you must understand key points or you will be at the mercy of the vendors. All stakeholders must be fluent as well.
- 2. Establish present needs and future plans.** We listed as mandatory the features our users loved about our existing system, then addressed pain points. We made a realistic gaze into the near future to see what technologies we might adopt. Most systems support dozens of standards and protocols, but they mean little if you have no intention of embracing them soon.
- 3. Determine criteria.** As you develop your comparison sheet, start ranking your criteria. What features are critical and should get the most attention during vendor negotiations? Uptime? Disaster recovery? Mobility? You'll probably need to make tradeoffs for cost reasons, so vet your criteria.
- 4. Narrow choices.** We narrowed our candidates to [Avaya](#), [Cisco Systems](#) and [ShoreTel](#). Avaya was the manufacturer of our incumbent system, had a broad range of users and offered a compelling hybrid VoIP system that allows for gradual installation that might yield cost savings. Cisco had the majority of the market, and our reliance on Cisco for our firmwide network infrastructure gave them a ticket to the contest. ShoreTel was gaining market share, particularly among firms of our size. Administrators we contacted were enthusiastic about the ShoreTel system and the company as a whole.
- 5. "Normalize" quotes.** Vendors package their systems differently, which can be challenging when comparing options. We provided all three vendors with identical guidance about features and headcounts, then asked each vendor to quote a price for our entire system, sans network, power or carrier changes -- broken down by location. This allowed us to conduct apples-to-apples comparisons.
- 6. Get feedback.** Each vendor built a test system that was left here for two weeks. They briefly trained some IT folks, and we had a series of "drop by" sessions where our personnel could drop by for cookies and kick the tires of the three proposed systems.

We surveyed them to get their reactions to operation, handset design, etc. We also made sure to get feedback from our satellite offices.
- 7. Final selection.** We used our criteria to further tweak proposals during the negotiating process. We compared pricing, user input, ease of administration, disaster recovery options, mobility and computer integration capabilities.

THE OUTCOME

On December 24, 2008, we chose ShoreTel. Overall, we felt that it was the easiest to administer, and offered a rich set of features that our users appreciated. Surprisingly, 74 percent of our surveyed users preferred ShoreTel over Cisco, despite a bias to Cisco as the process began.

The architecture and cost of the ShoreTel system also helped us extend the full system into smaller locations than

previously financially possible, due to its ability to scale. Even our smallest offices and telecommuters could enjoy its full telephone system functions for around \$1,500 per seat, including equipment and software.

SURPRISES

There were some surprises throughout the process:

- A surprising number of vendors could not transcend jargon and clearly articulate the value of system or carrier features.
- Despite the huge differences in the three vendors' companies, the proposals were remarkably close.
- The biggest cost differential was fees charged by system integrators -- so keep a close eye on them.

[Peter Baran](#) is director of technology with [Stradling Yocca Carlson & Rauth](#), which is based in Newport Beach, Calif.

 [Post a Comment](#)



[About Incisive Media](#) | [About Law.com](#) | [Customer Support](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#)

Copyright 2009. Incisive Media US Properties, LLC. All rights reserved.