

Achieving Enhanced IT Functionality and Cutting Costs with Hosted Services



BY LEIGH HENRY

In today's market environment, the legal profession – like many other industries – faces significant cost pressures and is turning to technology solutions to cut operating costs. From the use of Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) for their telephony solutions to off-premise hosted e-mail service, the Internet as a software delivery platform has increasingly become a viable solution that small and medium-sized law practices are adopting to enhance their IT functionality, all while driving down costs.

Greg DeWitt, President of DeWitt Law, PLLC in Carrboro, North Carolina, recently moved his business to a hosted VoIP environment for his company's telephony needs, and says he isn't looking back.

"I think that it has been a big plus with our clients, and a couple of them have actually commented positively on it," he said. "We're a focused practice with a total of seven employees, but hosted VoIP allows us to project a presence of a much larger firm. But, again, what's key for us is that our clients are noticing the difference."

HOSTED VS. ON-PREMISE VOIP PHONE SERVICE

VOIP is a business or consumer phone service that you get over the Internet. With the quality of calls comparable to that of traditional service, and the cost often much lower, VoIP has become an attractive option for businesses of all sizes – but specifically for small to medium-sized organizations, including law firms.

Today's VoIP-seeking businesses have two options: hosted or on-premise. With an on-premise system, all equipment, servers, and routers are housed onsite. With an on-premise VoIP solution, upgrades and modifications to telephony configurations can be executed internally and immediately. However, on-premise also requires costly up-front capital expenditures for hardware and software, an in-house IT staff capable of troubleshooting VoIP-specific technical issues, and the need to manage

ongoing operating expenses. And if a practice has multiple offices or employees working remotely, managing an in-house solution becomes even more complex. A hosted VoIP solution eliminates many of these challenges, enabling a smooth migration from traditional phone service, allowing for greater ease when adding new users and features, and reducing headaches that come from handing over IT management to a trusted partner.

Quality, cost, and mobility all position hosted VoIP as a viable option for firms wanting a business-class phone system – without the hassles of installation, investment cost, and growth limitations. Mobility, specifically, is a significant advantage of using hosted VoIP services. Because hosted VoIP is managed remotely on vendor servers, as long as there Internet access, users can receive calls to their work line, and check voicemail from anywhere in the world.

In DeWitt's case, the advantages of mobility mean he can bring on additional help during the summer.

"I have some interns that I would like to bring on for the summer, but I have no more space in [my current] location, so I was actually looking for a new location in downtown Durham. I can literally drop these two interns into [a different] office and throw a computer in there, throw two phones in there, and give them two extensions, and they are fully functional. ... The mobile office thing was a key differentiator for why I went with hosted VoIP."

HELP FOR SMALLER FIRMS

More than 70 percent of ALA members work in law firms that employ fewer than 75 attorneys. For these small and medium-sized firms, enterprise-class e-mail is a mission-critical component of their communications needs, particularly in today's competitive market environment. Hosted Exchange enables small practices to level the business communications playing field by

providing services such as enterprise-class messaging, shared address book and contacts manager, a shared company calendar, and task manager capabilities – all of which make the practice of law more efficient, mobile, and secure.

Hosted Exchange also enables the flexibility to add/remove users and services on demand, including archiving and advanced anti-spam/anti-virus capabilities that standard e-mail accounts simply can't support.

Hosted Exchange lets a firm outsource the management, maintenance, and support of their email system to experts – freeing up the firm's attorneys and support staff to focus on their core business needs. With a hosted model, a small or medium-sized law firm without dedicated IT resources can have all the benefits of a business-class e-mail system, but without the hassles of maintenance and cost that come with managing an in-house e-mail server.

Hosted services enable law firms to communicate more efficiently with their clients or potential clients, while projecting a highly professional public image – all without costly start-up fees, storing servers onsite, or losing vital billable hours.

THE FINANCIAL IMPACT

Perhaps the greatest advantage of hosted services is the savings that a small or medium-sized firm can realize by going with a hosted provider. In today's down economy, this can be a critical differentiator and competitive cost advantage.

"I like the fact that I didn't have to spend \$12,000 in up-front capital costs," DeWitt said. I basically pay a fee every month for the services provided, and I get to expense it that year. That's a nice plus."

Hosted solutions offer attorneys and their staff many advantages over in-house services. The mobility, flexibility, quality, and cost-savings that a small or medium-sized law firm can realize are all reasons that a legal administrator or managing partner should consider upgrading its organization's phone or e-mail system.

about the author



Leigh Henry is the Director of Product Management for Apptix's On-Demand portfolio of Voice and Hosted Exchange products. She has more than 15 years of sales and marketing experience in delivering managed services and solutions. Learn more at www.apptix.com.

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