

C insight

SIX MONTHS IS A long time in IPC



Bob Emmerson

It's interesting and exciting to write about IP Communications (IPC), but being in a business that moves this fast must be scary. In the last six months I've witnessed some amazing developments, particularly in the hosted voice space for SMBs.

Having just come back from a Global Telecoms conference on the NGN (Next Generation Network) I'm more convinced than ever that the incumbents have missed the IPC boat. Their core competence is managing a network, not providing a service, other than that of baseline telephony.

They can forget the SMB sector: the smaller, nimbler service providers (SPs) are already marketing attractive offers. And the enterprise market is problematic since CIOs want to own and manage the services and applications. They don't want to be locked in to a third party.

At VON Europe, held in Stockholm, I saw an offer that looks to be too good to be true, but forget the cliché: it comes from an established player with a good track record. VozTelecom (www.voztele.com), an innovative SP based in Barcelona, has launched a service known as OIGAA (it means hello but said with passion and energy). OIGAA gives small businesses most everything they could possibly want for FREE. Details come in a moment.

The physical location of the service is not relevant since the Net eliminates distance and VozTelecom has over 20 partners (earlier service) around the world and they are looking for more. More specifically, partners who would develop a co-branded local service.

I was impressed and then I started to think about the lock-in issue. What would a customer do if they used the service and then — heaven forbid — VozTelecom (or any other SP) went out of business? After all, it's a very competitive business, particularly when you give a lot of good stuff away for free.

I work from home, in the Netherlands, and the only service I employ is a UK virtual number that rings my desktop IP phone and then my mobile if I don't answer. Not rocket science but it's all I need. Anyway, to find the answer I contacted my SP — Voipfone (www.voipfone.co.uk) and this was the reply from Colin Duffy, CEO of Voipfone and Director of the UK's VoIP industry trade group, ITSPA.

"ITSPA exists to promote a viable and competitive VoIP industry in the UK - that includes behaving responsibly and pro actively to protect our customer's best interests. Allowing the customer to easily take their number to other providers if they are not up to scratch, or if a new company fails, shows how confident we are as an industry — and it's great for consumers too; it puts them in control and keeps providers on their toes."

There are 60+ members of ITSPA, so if a member fails, their numbers can be ported to another member who will provide continuity of service.

Take a look at Voipfone's offer and ask yourself this question: if I was running a small business would this give me all the comms functionality I want, both now and in future? The answer has to be yes, so farewell CPE solutions to this market sector given the fact that you're not locked in.

FREE FUNCTIONALITY

OIGAA is a Web-based, hosted communication service that has advanced PBX features. There's no need for new hardware, no software to install, no headphones or special terminals are needed.

It works essentially as a traditional PBX, providing phone extensions to each user for internal communications and external lines for concurrent calls to other networks. Incoming calls from telephony networks are mapped into local numbers and are subsequently routed to the required destination. Local numbers can be mapped to any extension, the auto attendant or hunt groups.

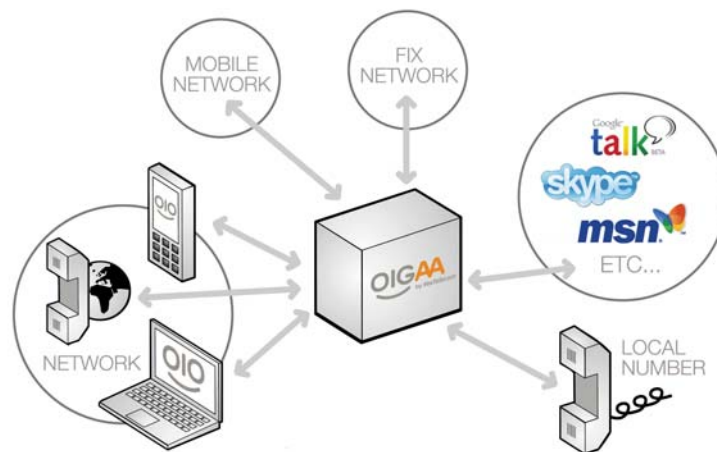
Small businesses, which VozTelecom defines as any company up to around 50 employees, get the following functionality for free. Unlimited phone extensions, virtual personal assistant, conferencing, music on hold, presence, IM and unlimited Internet calls to other OIGAA and Skype users.

For backward telephony compatibility, the new extensions can be mapped into any IP phone or adaptor. In addition, the service can be integrated with any conventional PBX enabling call transfers between any OIGAA user and PBX extensions.

When the user is on mobile, the service can process incoming calls and forward them to mobile handsets. Both 2G and 3G terminals are supported, but a Windows Mobile handset is recommended.

SHOW ME THE MONEY

VozTelecom isn't a charity. They give the functionality away for free so the business model must be based on usage. Subscribers are charged when calls terminate on the PSTN, but there is a flat rate plan of £29.95 per month (£20) which gets you unlimited calls to more than 60 countries. Charges are also made for additional local numbers for each extension, video calls to mobile phones and value-added services such as video conferencing.



OIGAA is a hosted, Web-based Voice 2.0 application. It features a video soft-phone that allows users to communicate with each other in any multimedia format and manage their presence status. At the time of writing OIGAA was in Beta and you can take a test drive by visiting www.oigaa.com