

Critical Mission

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FEATURED ARTICLE

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Microsoft is a Phone Company

With the Office 365 E5 Plan, in addition to all the Office products and services you can make Microsoft your phone company. If you like the idea of moving your Exchange Server into the cloud, you'll love having your PBX and other phone hardware virtualized as well.

A Long Time Coming

It all started with Microsoft's 8.5 billion acquisition of Skype way back in 2011. Years went by and Skype continued to be a completely separate product. In late 2015 the Office 365 E5 Plan debuted with options for public switched telephone network (PSTN) connectivity provided via the global Skype network and a cloud-based PBX. In plain terms, Microsoft provides your "dial tone" and you have zero relationship with your previous phone company. Everything is done via your Internet connection.

Decisions, Decisions

As with other "move it to the cloud" operations, the physical hardware associated with your phone system disappears and is virtualized in Microsoft data centers. But not necessarily the handset. This is where this discussion becomes very complicated, because you have so many options. Depending on your handset make and model, you:

- might end up keeping it, if it is already a networked device and is compatible,
- replace it with a new physical product,
- toss it completely and use the native capabilities of your computer.

It's entirely possible to combine all three options in a single organization. Continuous phone users like sales people will benefit from new, purpose-built handsets and headsets. Other users that rarely make or take calls could use a purely virtual "phone" on their computers.

What's It Really Like?

When your phone is integrated with Skype for Business, voice is just one more option among many for reaching out and communicating. You no longer have to make a conscious decision to make a phone call, it becomes an option accessible with a click.

Here's an example: I am about to respond to an e-mail in Outlook and I notice that one of my colleagues was cc'd on it. The presence awareness icon next to his name shows that he's available but not in the office. I need his input so I send a quick instant message – "Hey, got a sec?". IM is good for short exchanges, but I'd rather talk. So I click the call button in the IM window and his phone rings. Keep in mind this entire process was conducted from my e-mail reply window. That's the power of integration.

Another very interesting point is that when I say "his phone rings", I don't really know for sure

what happened, other than that we're talking. By that I mean, my colleague could be:

- Sitting at his usual desk, holding a physical handset.
- Sitting at someone else's desk in a different building, using Skype with the computer's microphone and speakers.
- Walking down a street, using his mobile phone, because he forwarded his office number there.

Your Network Folks Will Love This

Phone service, phone numbers, conference calls, voice mail –everything associated with managing your phone system is controlled through familiar Windows management tools and interfaces.

Here's an example: With a single PowerShell command you can assign a new phone number to a Skype for Business account.

What Else is in the E5 Plan?

Office 365 plans are a complex subject. Rather than trying to explain it all here, I'll just list the additional products and services that are not part of the E3 plan.

The E5 plan includes unlimited email, all the social tools (Yammer, SharePoint Online, and Office 365 Video), the full Office Suite including Access, OneDrive for Business, Advanced Threat Protection for secure attachments and URLs, Cloud PBX, PSTN Conferencing, PSTN Calling, Delve Analytics, and Power BI Pro.

While the phone aspect is a big deal, and a very new and different experience with Microsoft, you can see that there's a lot more to the E5 plan.

Each of the additions could be a newsletter topic by itself.

Summary

Phone lines and phone calls are now part of the Office 365 feature set. Your organization is now free to treat phone communications as a flexible service that's easily customizable and fully integrated with the rest of Office.

Contact Alto if you'd like to learn more about the many features and benefits of Microsoft Office 365.