

Choosing the right
Phone System for Medical
Practices and GP Federations



INTRODUCTION

Phone systems have been installed in Doctors Surgeries or Medical Practices of different sizes for more than 40 years, providing a vital service. Since then, telephone call handling has matured to become intertwined with the day-to-day process of running the Practice.

Practices vary by culture and user expectations as does how to manage Practice communications between patients, staff and managers.

The average phone system lasts anywhere between six and eight years, after which the system is either out of maintenance or is lagging in features, often to the extent that it is hurting the performance of the Practice. Practices that need to upgrade their existing phone system will find a huge array of new solutions available compared to seven or eight years ago.

For starters, new software-based communications solutions don't need dedicated hardware in the storeroom or data room anymore, because the entire system runs in the cloud. In many instances, "hard phones" such as your desk phone are not even required. New phone solutions often include a "soft phone" or "client" that runs on many different devices, such as your PC, tablet or smartphone.

And modern phone solutions no longer offer just "voice". They have transformed to offer a range of Unified Communications (UC) capabilities such as instant messaging, presence, video calling, collaboration tools and mobility solutions, all designed to improve productivity.

This paper will provide a quick and easy guide to common questions that arise when you're looking for a new business phone system.



A FEW QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

Missed Calls

- How many phone calls does your Practice miss because the lines are busy?

Disparate Systems

- Do you have different systems in different Practices resulting in features that don't work the same, causing staff confusion?

Infrastructure Maintenance

- Is your phone system a vital organ in your Practice and, if it goes down, so do you?
- Have you suffered a network or equipment failure that has stopped inbound and outbound calls?
- Do you worry about having to fix elements of the phone system yourself if something goes wrong?

Fluctuating/Fraudulent Expenses

- Are you worried about unexpected bills with domestic tiered minutes pricing?
- When you bought your last phone system, do you think you got a good deal - or did you find out a lot of hidden costs after you bought the basic system?
- Do you want to avoid hidden costs with maintenance of the system this time around?

Enterprise Usage

- Do your travelling GP's struggle with contacting staff in the Practice simply because they are out in the field?
- Do your staff struggle with those endless sets of buttons on the handset and end up dropping patient calls?
- Do your staff feel detached from the Practice when they are out of the office?
- Does the phone system really deliver the professional image that you want to portray of your Practice?

Ask yourself:

What do I need from my next system?

It's easy to simply go out and buy a like for like replacement for your phone system, but doing so would mean you are missing a golden opportunity to bring a range of powerful new capabilities into your Practice. Before you start looking at different phone system options, think carefully about what you need in your next phone system.

If you've identified with some or all of these questions, you are not alone. They are some of the most common issues we see today in the Practice world when it comes to replacing a phone system.

Chances are you will need to prioritise these questions into the ones that are most important for your Practice.

We'll look at that prioritisation a little later on, but in the meantime let's focus on what your next phone system can do for you and your patients.

To make things easier we'll just stick to cloud based phone systems, as they are more effective especially when they are dispersed over a large number of sites.



HOW DO MODERN PHONE SYSTEMS HELP MY PRACTICE?

It is easy to get lost in the jargon of technology with people espousing acronyms about features that may or may not make sense to you. So let's try to narrow down your new phone system into some key areas:

Costs

We'll start with what is one of your primary concerns - costs. Will this phone system save me money? Most cloud phone services come with a fixed minutes and user plan. You pay a certain amount for the user and the minutes come with it.

That's it - end of cost concerns. And many cloud systems also have very powerful fraud management capabilities that will catch a problem before you are even aware.

Flexibility

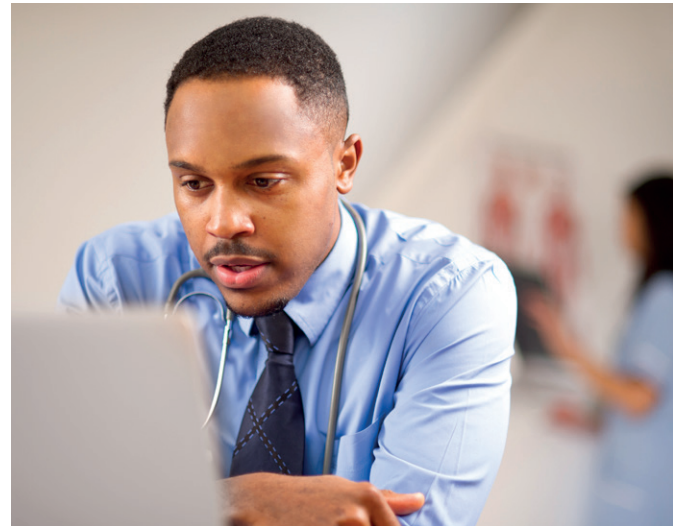
This is linked to costs. Chances are when you bought your last phone system you ended up over specifying it because you had to buy it in specific configurations. In the cloud, you just buy what you need - no more, no less. If you need more capability in the future, you just add it. You only pay for what you use today and add more users as your Practice grows or you merge/federate with other Surgeries.

Disasters

We like to think they never happen, but they do. Suppose the electricity board manages to put their digger through your phone lines - what do you do? What happens if there is a fire or a flood? With a cloud-based phone system, disaster recovery is simple. Your patients will never know the difference.

Consistency

You may have merged or federated with other practices over a number of years and inherited different phone systems that work in different ways. With the cloud, all the systems work the same everywhere. So your surgeries, mobile workers and remote workers will all have access to the same powerful range of features.



HOW DO MODERN PHONE SYSTEMS HELP MY PRACTICE?

Usability

Cloud systems integrate with your clinical systems so you can simply click to call out of a web page or directory listing. Everything is totally intuitive to the extent that you will probably forget about pressing phone buttons within a few days of getting your new system.

Professionalism

Cloud-based phone systems have a large array of features that until recently, were only available on very expensive systems used by major companies. Now you can deliver a highly professional image by having auto attendants, hunt groups and a range of other call routing features, so that you always look totally professional to your patients.

Productivity

Imagine getting a new employee totally for free. With cloud-based phone systems, you can implement a range of productivity features that allow your current staff to communicate and collaborate much more effectively than before, thereby improving the overall productivity of your Practice. Features such as room-based collaboration, conference calling and instant messaging can dramatically improve the productivity of your Practice.

Mobility

Chances are your workforce is getting increasingly mobile. You need to be where your patients are and so being mobile is vital. But being mobile should not mean being disconnected from the Practice. With cloud-based phone systems, the mobile worker is always connected to the central nervous system of your Practice. They are not remote - they are just mobile.

Maintenance

The days of calling the telecoms engineer are well and truly over. Chances are, with a cloud-based phone system you will never see that person again. Phones are easy to move around with no specialist skills involved. System management is all done via the web with lots of handy videos to step you through the more complicated tasks. Cloud systems are designed to make your life easy and just keep running 24/7 so you don't have to worry about the costs or waiting for the telecoms man to come and fix something.



WHICH PHONE SYSTEM SHOULD I CHOOSE?

There are many different types of cloud phone systems to choose from, but it pays to really understand the underlying technology - or platform - behind your service provider. The platform determines the provider's ability to innovate rapidly and drive the biggest impact for your Practice.

Some phone system providers base their service on freeware code that has been available for many years on the Internet. It's great for them because it is low-cost to develop and allows them to start their businesses up quickly. Unfortunately many of these freeware-based services have issues with quality and, more worryingly, security that ultimately could cost you dearly with a fraud attack.

By contrast there are some highly industrialised platforms out in the market today developed by specialised vendors. They deliver superior features and functionality, reliability and a proven track record.

Leading service providers have rigorous requirements, and require a platform that is secure and powerful.



Ask yourself: What do I need from my next system?

We have arranged the key features you should look out for by category, in order to make the selection process easier.

Key Issue	Key things to ask for
Costs	Check what is included and not included in the minutes bundle. Are there any exit clauses in the service contract? Do you have to rent the phones for longer than the service contract?
Flexibility	Can you add or remove users during the service contract? Do you have to pay for devices or for users?
Disasters	Can the system divert calls to tablets or mobile phones when the access network is down? Are there restrictions in the features when people are remote?
Consistency	Are all the features available to remote workers or do some get removed? Is the quality the same- for example, some mobile systems only use a technology called VoIP when remote, which can hurt voice quality if the network is congested.
Usability	Are the features the same on the phone, PC and mobile devices or are they different?
Professionalism	Does the system support features such as auto attendant, music on hold, automatic call distribution, call queuing, so you never miss a call?
Productivity	Does the system have features like conferencing, room-based collaboration and instant messaging and presence?
Mobility	Does the system support iOS and Android devices? Can it support the features you need when mobile?
Maintenance	Does the system have web-based user self-administration and allow you to control powerful features from a single web page? Does the service support diagnostics so the service provider can quickly identify any issues that you may run into?

CONCLUSION

Buying the correct phone system has the potential to make a huge difference to the success of your Practice or Federation in the next 5-10 years. Choosing the right system could mean hiring less staff, worrying less about disasters and yes, saving you money.

If you've outgrown your current phone system, take the time to go through the questions we've outlined above, and write out your top needs and requirements.



For more information, please contact us today:

T. **0800 9778775**

E. **sales@switchmedical.co.uk**

W. **www.switchmedical.co.uk**



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No. 1 Croydon, 12-16 Addiscombe Road, Croydon CR0 0XT
T. 0800 977 8775 E. sales@switchmedical.co.uk

www.switchmedical.co.uk

