Using your Linux computer to make phone calls

Internet Phones

When they were first brought in, Internet phones failed due to the lack of bandwidth for most users. Now with the rise of broadband and always on access, it is time to reconsider how Internet telephony can save you money.

BY JOHN SOUTHERN

Using your computer as a telephone once seemed a distant dream. With the rapid increase in processing speeds of CPUs and the fall in cost of fast Internet access, the dream is becoming a reality for more people.

By taking advantage of the advancement of technology we can save a little money from our overall company running costs, which is good news for every business. By using GPL and Open Source software we can be sure of the code we are using and solve errors where they occur.

All this sounds perfect. Too perfect, unfortunately. Before we decide to throw away our tried and trusted phone systems from the big telephone companies, we have to decide on just which standard we want to follow. As we have found out in the past, there are many standards and they are usually incompatible with one another.

Choosing the wrong option may limit some of our contact with customers as they choose other codecs and systems, and that is not a good thing for anyone, least of all the company profit figure.

Fortunately, the market is finally starting to settle down by focusing on some standards. The next question we then have to consider is: do we need to use physical hardware devices that can seriously add to our pricing or can we make do with a softphone system that relies on computers, soundcards and microphones?

We start of this month's cover story with a look at the Voice over IP (VoIP) basics. We start by looking at how you can intergrate VoIP into your existing systems, and what you need to be able to make and recieve telephone calls from anyone using a normal phone on the existing world PST system. Included is an overview of the commonest codecs that are used by the majority of VoIP gateway providers.

As the number of phones we require increases, so does the need to have and control our own telephone exchange. We take an in depth look at the current market favorite – Asterisk with its ability to incorporate answerphones. As this is a little more than running an installation script, we guide you through all the necessary stages of setting up your own free VoIP exchange.

To end the cover story, we take a look at seven Linux softphones to test and compare their functions and features, so you can choose the best for your setup. ∎