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Choosing a telecommunications system

Tons of Choices Can Be Confusing; Here's How to Get Started

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LAKELAND | Ma Bell's rule over telephones has been over for years, and businesses have an increasing number of choices when considering a telecommunications system.

But "choices" often translates to "confusion" when trying to determine the best system for a small business's needs. However, there are some considerations to help ensure you select the right system for your business.

Whether you are seeking Internet, telephone, cable services or any combination of those, it is important to select companies that have adequate security, firewalls and encryption codes to protect the information going through the lines, said **Paul Lopez**, a lawyer who heads the labor and employment department at **Tripp Scott P.A.** in Fort Lauderdale.

"Reputable companies are preferable to start-up companies," and the bigger companies tend to have adequate security in place, Lopez said.

Sharon Shaffer, a Verizon media relations spokeswoman, recommends analyzing a supplier's credentials before making a decision.

Business owners can learn about suppliers through Better Business Bureau outlets, small-business magazine Web sites or independent analysts before determining which supplier to choose, she said.

It's also important to consider quality in addition to price when selecting a company, said representatives from Verizon and Bright House Networks.

Not all services are equal, so look for proof in reliability guarantees, Shaffer said. Some businesses can afford a few hours of downtime here or there, while others suffer if service is lost even for just a few minutes. She suggests evaluating how important reliability is to the company's bottom line.

Another important consideration is repair and support services. Large, reputable companies offer technical services 24 hours a day, seven days a week, said Joe Durkin, senior director of corporate communications for Bright House Networks.

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

Many tech-savvy business owners who have a high-speed Internet connection are turning to Voice-over-Internet Protocol - commonly referred to as VoIP - for their telecommunications needs.

For example, companies such as Vonage and Packet8 Internet Phone Service offer business packages that can be significantly cheaper than mainstream telecommunications providers.

A recent InformationWeek Research study carried out on 280 companies using or planning to use VoIP found that most companies chose VoIP because it would lower their telecommunications costs.

However, VoIP has some pitfalls that should be considered before choosing this service, according to About.com. Those pitfalls include voice quality, bandwidth dependency, power dependency, emergency calls and security.

PROTECTING SENSITIVE INFORMATION

Once you've selected a service provider, protecting your company's information - especially trade secrets and other sensitive data - should be a priority, Lopez said.

There are simple in-house measures that can be taken to protect proprietary information, such as making sure information on computers is accessible only to those who have a need for it.

Lopez, who offers training and consulting on this topic, recommends that companies give each employee who needs to access the information a different password. He also recommends changing the passwords periodically.

"You don't want information that is secret on a database where everyone has access to read, change, print or download if they wanted," Lopez said.

Systems also should be in place to protect information if employees work from home, he said. For example, providing employees with external hard drives and supplying them with adequate firewall, antivirus and spam protection on their home computers can help

businesses protect their information.

"It's not a bad investment for the employer to fund that," Lopez said. "It's the employer who will be in the hot seat if the information is somehow revealed."

Instant messaging and texting have become a part of mainstream communication in the corporate world, but some caution should be exercised when using those communication methods, Lopez said.

E-mail can be safe enough to send secure items if firewalls and encryption codes are used, but Lopez recommends that highly sensitive information be restricted from wireless systems.

"There is plenty of stuff out there to combat this," Lopez said. "Employers are being negligent if they don't take these precautions."