Book Reviews

A Friendly Introduction to VoIP

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Internet Phone Services Simplified
Jim Doherty and Neil Anderson
157 pages
US$19.99
Cisco Press, 2006

If you’re looking for free phone service, you’ll probably have to be content with local calls. However, in quite a few instances, Internet phone services can substantially reduce your monthly phone bill. For example, if you make frequent international phone calls, Voice over the Internet Protocol chat services are the real deal. Jim Doherty and Neil Anderson present a simplified handbook for making your own decisions about VoIP, how to install it at home, and how to deal with some of the troubleshooting aspects.

Is VoIP for me?

The first thing that impressed me was the book’s “metaindex,” a graphical, practical overview of the subjects the book covers. The handbook manages to avoid technical overload. Doherty and Anderson explain each concept at different depths so you can get into the subject matter at successive levels of understanding. They get you into an almost entirely graphical, step-by-step path for installing the essential parts of your Internet phone service.

The book either assumes that you already have a working home network or that you don’t need a sophisticated understanding of the inner workings of what a network is. In most cases, you probably won’t. If you do need to get an efficient home network (or if you need some help building it), Doherty and Anderson recommend their other book, Home Networking Simplified (Cisco Press, 2006), every now and then.

They also describe VoIP’s features and compare them to traditional and cellular phone service and even warn about some features when necessary. For example, VoIP services might help reduce your phone bill if you make a lot of long-distance (national) calls. VoIP might help even with local calls. If you have teenagers at home, you might find it convenient to have both a “normal” phone and one whose signal goes through the Internet protocol. For international calls, VoIP chat services are more economical by far than regular phone service or VoIP connected to a regular phone rather than a computer, although the sound quality still isn’t very good. An entire chapter is dedicated to examples of the total expenses you could incur using VoIP. Doherty and Anderson warn about the powering of phones: your normal phone gets its power from the phone company, but VoIP phones get the power from your home’s electrical outlets. So, if a blackout occurs, you won’t have a working VoIP phone. Doherty and Anderson repeat this in almost every chapter, so it’s certainly something to think about. Another important warning concerns emergency services (911 in the US), which might not be fully functional over VoIP. For example, VoIP might offer a “local” phone number for a city you don’t live in, so if you dial 911, emergency services might not be able to locate you.
Doherty and Anderson make a fair comparison between different phone services, including cell phones, so that you can determine each service's advantages and disadvantages when it comes to your own situation. Some features are available in the fixed, mobile, and VoIP phones. Others are exclusive to each type of system. For example, because VoIP uses the Internet protocol, you can get a phone number (subject to availability) that's local to another city, as I mentioned earlier. This lets you pay the rate for local calls, even if you live on the other side of the country.

A few caveats

Doherty and Anderson recommend the Web site (http://www.geeksquad.com) as a “24-hour computer support task force established to protect society from the assault of computerized technology”—that is, the Geek Squad staff are supposed to be available 24/7 to help you not only with VoIP concerns, but also with other matters. I must say with great disappointment that I tried several times to get onto the site, but it was unavailable, probably because of overwhelming demand. So, if this page is going to be accessible only at 2:30 in the morning, it’s not really that practical, is it?

The book has quite a few typos, and even some grammatical mistakes. However, none of these mistakes is a real obstacle for a fluid understanding of the ideas. The tables and graphics compensate for (almost) any lack of clarity in the text, and you can infer the rest without substantial problems.

The general public always welcomes a handbook without too much technical fuss, and Anderson and Doherty have managed to write a simple, small, and (almost) self-contained manual for making the proper decisions regarding installing a VoIP service. I also don’t think it’s a bad idea to buy their book about home networks, although it’s not mandatory. This is a useful book, even without the help of the Geek Squad. I recommend it for a general audience, even one without a technical background.

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