



15 Questions to ask before choosing a **Hosted PBX Provider**

A guide to help
you as you sort
through the wide
array of Hosted PBX
providers.



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15 Questions To Ask Before Choosing A Hosted PBX Provider

Choosing the right Hosted PBX can be a challenge.



Hosted PBX. The Cloud. VoIP. All of these terms can combine into a daunting challenge when all you really want to do is get the best phone system for your business at the lowest possible cost. You might not have the time to become an expert in the topic, but you want to be sure that you are not subscribing to a service and equipment arrangement that doesn't fit your needs and goals.

Please use these fifteen questions as a guide to help you as you sort through the wide array of Hosted PBX providers. Then ask us. We specialize in helping companies just like yours update their phone systems without any upfront costs and, often times, without increasing current monthly spend. We are confident that answers you get from MIX Networks will assure you that we are the right service provider for you.

1. What is the contract termination policy?

Contract termination issues are often the last thing anybody wants to think about once all the technical and service issues are researched and resolved. However, it is this very fact that causes many companies lots of headaches down the road if they find that their original provider does not live up to expectations.

Remember that contacts should serve the needs of both parties. If a provider offers you lots of free up-front benefits like installation and on-site training, network analysis, new equipment, etc. you should be prepared for a term to be attached to the contract. A quality provider may have to make a significant investment to deliver the quality service that you need. In exchange for that, you must make a commitment back to them in the form of committing to many months of service or to pay early termination fees.

You want to avoid making an extended commitment to a provider and getting nothing in return. Often an unscrupulous provider will hide these fees in the contract, or they will give you little or no up-front benefits and still expect a commitment from you.

Even worse, they may hold your telephone numbers or calling records hostage until you pay termination fees. If you truly want a “no commitment” contract, then don’t expect much from your provider.

2. Will I get the features I need?

You should have a list of your “must have” features in hand before you start looking for a Hosted PBX Provider. You should also consider what features you might need in the future if your business grows, or if you will be adding additional locations or employees who work from home. Another important consideration is if you will need any Call Center or other advanced or custom features in the near future.

Inventorying your specific needs and goals initially will help you get the right service package from the start and will minimize unexpected charges should you need to expand your hosted pbx services. Beware if any of these important features are “coming soon” or “in development.” New features are generally delivered on the provider’s schedule – not yours, so don’t buy into a potentially available feature in order to get a lower price today.



3. What additional equipment will I need?

Hosted PBX is often delivered as an Over-The-Top service that uses your existing internet connection and Local Area Network (LAN). If either of these elements are not sufficient for the added load that a Hosted PBX puts on them, you may need additional equipment, as well as network and/or IP connection upgrades to ensure the quality of service that you need. Getting optimal quality-of-service often requires that you purchase a new modem and/or router. Ask if the service provider includes a QoS (quality of service) router with their offering. QoS Routers are dual purpose. They can enable remote insight and support from a service provider perspective, and also allow for traffic shaping to prioritize voice over data traffic on an IP connection, ensuring optimal call quality. You may also need to upgrade your Ethernet switch – especially if you need to take advantage of power-over-Ethernet (POE) in areas of your building where power outlets are scarce.

4. What if I change the number of lines?

The flexibility to add or decrease the number of lines or the number of users as needed is one of the key benefits of using a Hosted PBX. Make sure that your provider has the flexibility to add capacity when you need it and without hidden fees for doing so. Remember, if you have made a term commitment to your provider, there may be a minimum number of lines or users per month that you must maintain. However, you should be able to add lines above that minimum commitment and drop back to it on demand. This is key for seasonal businesses. Ideally your provider should give you the ability to add or modify services on your own via a web portal or ticketing system, without the need to call support.



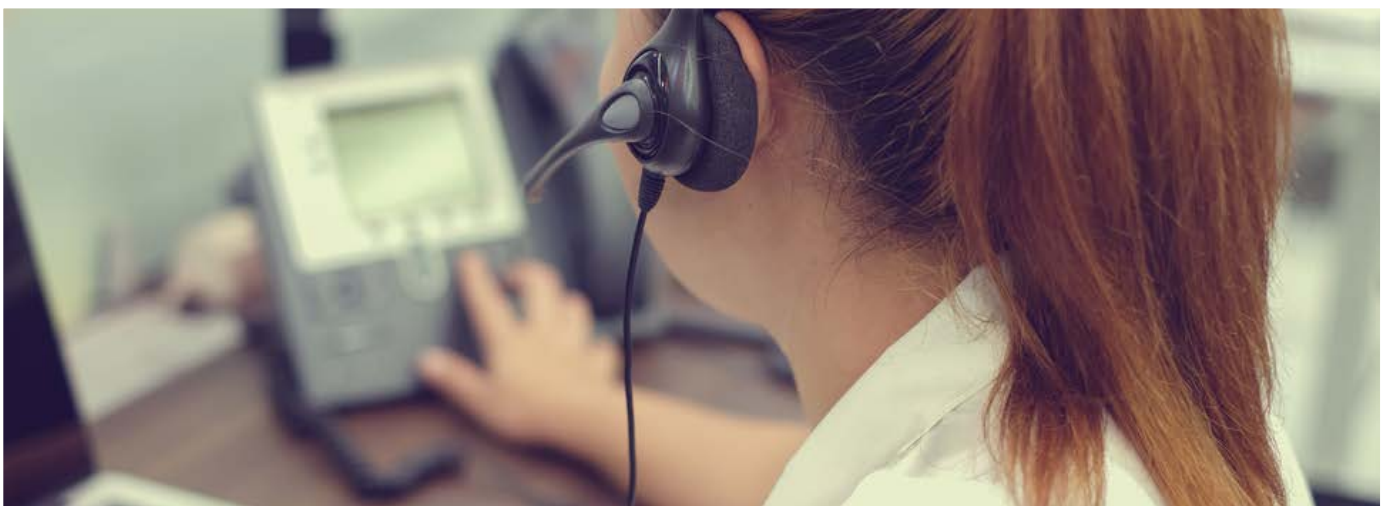
5. Is Support Included? 24/7? Where is your support center based?

Every service provider wants to tell you that their service is so reliable and easy that you will never need support or any training beyond your initial set-up. However, adding new employees, changing requirements or feature requests, power or ISP outages, or any network issue could create an immediate support need.

Have the provider tell you what type and level of support is available to you. Are support techs available to take a live phone call, or is support only provided via a ticketing system or chat interface? Providers should have a clear set of instructions outlining the procedures for getting your issue resolved quickly. There are few things more frustrating than unresolved service-affecting issues. Ask what the process is to escalate and resolve issues, should the standard support process fail.

If you require a guaranteed level of service reliability, ask the provider to produce a SLA (Service Level Agreement). The SLA requires the carrier to adhere to a certain level of performance, with predefined consequences (usually in the form of account credits) for a provider's lack of performance.

If it is important to you, ask where the provider's support center and technicians are based – domestic or foreign. Make sure that support is included in your service contract and that it is provided by readily accessible personnel with whom you feel comfortable.



6. Can I keep my current number? Charges to Port?

This is another top question. Second and third tier service providers often do not have a local footprint in your area. They may instead ask you to consider a new number or forward your numbers to another number that they control rather than porting your numbers directly to their service. This is not an ideal scenario, as it creates another point of failure, and further complicates quality of service management, as well as troubleshooting.

Ideally, a provider should have a vast supportable phone number footprint – whether it is their own network, or one that they've created by partnering with Tier 1 providers. The point is that if they are a reputable provider and are asking you to become a customer, they should be able to support your local phone number.

Porting a phone number should be a painless task that requires only that you submit a bill copy and a Letter of Agency (LOA) form that grants the service provider permission to take control of your number. The porting process itself should be seamless, with no “down time” or service interruptions.

Many times, porting fees can be reduced or even waived, especially if you opt to sign a contract term. Be sure to review the provider's terms and conditions carefully with regard to porting your numbers out. Some providers might try to keep your numbers to prevent you from going elsewhere. This is particularly true if the provider issued new numbers to you from their own pool of numbers. If you choose to move to another service provider after your contract term is up, you should have the freedom to be able to take your phone numbers with you without a hassle.

7. How does the system handle remote and mobile workers?

Supporting remote, mobile, and work-from-home employees is often a key driver when upgrading a phone system. Make sure that these types of workers are able to access the entire suite of features from the new system, even when they are not in the office.

Some providers offer softphones or mobile apps, which can eliminate the need for expensive handsets for mobile/remote workers. Discuss the options with your provider to determine which solution is right for the way that your company does business.

8. What startup costs are there beyond setup and equipment fees?

This is where many providers try to sneak in additional equipment and hidden charges. Their fee may only include their service, but your internet connection or LAN may need significant upgrades to be able to handle the additional load of using a Hosted PBX.

A reputable service provider will recommend a site survey/network analysis before bringing you onto their service. The site survey serves several purposes. It helps determine your network's readiness to support the hosted pbx, identifying available bandwidth and other LAN/network considerations. It also helps the provider from a network planning perspective. A proper site survey will account for all administrative extensions, call queues, hunt groups, phone numbers, fax or conferencing lines, missing cable runs, etc. This information becomes an inventory and a template that allows the provider to build your hosted pbx. The more thorough this pre-work is, the smoother the new service implementation will go.

Expect to pay for a site survey, especially if the service provider has associated travel costs. Many times, service providers will include the site survey costs with the monthly recurring charge. You might also be able to negotiate a reduced total cost if the service provider will be doing the actual on-site installation of the new equipment for you.

9. What day-to-day usage costs are not covered by my service plan? What are the rates for international calls?

Service fees, per-minute charges, and connection fees are often places where a provider can tack on additional monthly costs.

In general, inbound toll free service is always per minute, as is international calling. Become familiar with your provider's rate decks for these services and review your bill to make sure these charges are properly applied so that you are not overcharged. Additionally, services like 411, 911, and multi-party conferencing may carry a per occurrence or per minute fee. If there is the possibility of any charges above your monthly service fee, make sure they are all enumerated before you sign that contract.

10. Can the system handle outbound and inbound faxes out of the box? Can I just plug in a fax machine or do I need special equipment?

Faxing over a VoIP system can be challenging. Without careful engineering, the right equipment, and correctly configured links to originating-terminating carriers, it can be difficult to send/receive a multi-page fax through a VoIP line. If faxing is still a key part of your business operation, make sure your carrier has a solution that delivers the reliability you need.

Hosted service providers may offer different options for faxing such as:

- Hosted (cloud-based) fax – where inbound faxes arrive as a .pdf attachment, or downloadable link, and outbound faxes are sent out via a print-to-fax option or via a portal.
- Machine-enabled fax – where an ATA (analog telephone adapter) and IP connection are used in conjunction with a traditional fax machine. Inbound and outbound faxes are handled directly from the fax machine.

The hosted (cloud-based) is a good option to avoid extra fees associated with special faxing equipment, plus you can take advantage of other associated cost-savings like reduced paper and toner costs. Talk with your service provider to determine the best fit to serve your faxing needs.

11. If I underestimate my requirements and need a major upgrade or my company grows, what are the additional costs for upgrading?

Another major benefit of using a hosted PBX is the elimination of concerns over upgrades, company growth, or dealing with seasonal fluctuations. Your provider should provide an easy to understand plan on how to deal with these situations.



12. Do I need add-ons or extras to handle old-style analog phones that I already have or that remote or branch offices have already installed?

There are many ways to support legacy telephony equipment and systems when connecting them to a hosted system that uses VoIP. Make sure that your new provider has expertise in this area if you plan to hold onto any phones from your legacy system. Otherwise, you may be forced to unexpectedly replace certain components that you originally planned to continue to use.

If you are going to continue to have any legacy analog equipment connected to the new hosted PBX, find out exactly what features will be supported when calling from that legacy gear. You may be able to place or receive a call, but other features that you want may not be available – or may be accessible only via star (*) codes – when connected to one of these old phones.

Additionally, make sure that your service provider understands the total scope of your project with regard to the legacy-hosted integration. Specialized equipment such as ATAs (Analog Telephone Adapters) or IP Gateways must be used to knit the legacy and new services together within the cloud. Be sure that you have properly accounted for the total number of analog devices, as this is directly related to the choice of ATA/IP Gateway device that your provider must use to enable service and could impact your monthly cost. If you have a large number of devices, this information is best captured during a detailed on-site survey conducted by your service provider.

13. How do you guarantee your quality of service?

Quality of Service is often the big differentiator between providers. A quality provider will have more than one data center, geographically separated, so that an outage or natural disaster in one location does not interrupt service. They will also have specialized equipment and monitoring tools to monitor their network (and your network as well) so that they can deal with network issues BEFORE they impact the quality of your calls.

They should also have a plan in place to reroute your calls in the event that you have an unexpected or emergency closure in your office. They may offer some sort of fail over service that routes all of your internet traffic (including your VoIP Calls) to the internet via a mobile data/cellular carrier that has sufficient bandwidth to handle all of your traffic.

14. What about emergency services — do you provide full 911 or E911 services? Will dispatchers know my location automatically — and how about remote workers?

Delivering a 911 or E911 service is very complicated when using a Hosted PBX. It is further complicated when we add mobile, remote, or work-from-home agents to the mix. Every legitimate hosted provider should be able to explain how they deliver this vital service. The most reliable service providers will have invested in a solid 911 solution, which is directly integrated with the 911 system and handles emergency calls via PSAPs (public safety answering points). Make sure that the provider you choose has a way for you to update your 911 registered locations on the fly, as the services are only effective if emergency personnel are dispatched to your correct physical location.

15. How do I know you are going to be around in the future?

You are constantly hearing about mergers and acquisitions in the telecommunications space, as well as stories of low-quality providers who start their business on-the-cheap and quickly go out of business. Make sure your service agreement addresses these possibilities so that you don't end up with your service interrupted or your telephone numbers held hostage.

Make sure that your Hosted provider has made the required investment in a quality network, and that they are doing business with other high-quality network and infrastructure providers.



Find out how your company can start benefiting from a Hosted PBX from MIX Networks.



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