

## Messaging and conferencing services

### *What they are and what they can do*

**Voice messaging** services are provided on the telephone network (either the fixed telephone/ISDN network or the mobile network) by most service providers. They act much like answering machines, but some have additional features.

- Messages can be taken while your phone is in use on another call or when there is no answer.
- A simple menu system can be used to take messages for different people/departments.
- Messages can be forwarded to another number.
- You can interrogate the messaging service from another phone to retrieve messages. Many services also allow you to record a new message from another phone for callers to hear.
- Faxes can be stored and forwarded, or retrieved later.
- Messaging services for mobile phones will send a text message to warn you that somebody has left a voice message for you.

Short **text messages** (of around 150 characters) can be sent to and from most mobile phones, and are known as SMS messages. The only phones which do not provide this service are the older 'analogue' phones; most mobile phones are now on the digital 'GSM' networks. If your phone is switched off, or out of range, the message will be stored and transmitted once the network is able to see your phone. Messages can also be automatically forwarded to your phone when it is abroad, as long as a roaming agreement exists between your home service provider and the foreign service provider. Longer text messages are better handled by e-mail – this is covered in the briefing on Internet Service providers.

**Conference services** allow a group of users at different locations to talk to each other, share files while they are talking and see each other. How many of these functions are available depends on the service being used and the type of connection to the network.

The simplest type of conference is a **3-way call** set up from your telephone. Most telephone networks allow this service, in which you set up the first call, put it on hold, set up the second call and then join the calls together to allow 3 phones to be interconnected. Normally, you are just charged the cost of the two calls.

**Voice conferences** that connect larger numbers of people are provided by conference service providers. They use equipment that will interconnect, typically, 10–20 people so that they can hold an audio conference. However it is difficult to manage an audio conference with more than about 10 participants. Normally, each participant calls a dedicated number, or is called by the conference service, and is then connected to the conference. The service providers have security procedures to make sure that only the right people join each conference. There is a charge for this conferencing service in addition to the cost of the phone calls. You can also buy the equipment needed to set up such voice conferences, but the high cost does not make it worthwhile for most SMEs.

**Video conferences**, as the name suggests, connect similar numbers of people and share video images of the participants. There is a wide range of videoconferencing products. At the top end are 'boardroom' systems that use broadband connections to link two or three meeting rooms with half a dozen participants in each. Boardroom systems can cost upwards of €30,000 per meeting room, so these are unlikely to be of interest to most small businesses. More compact systems suitable for two or three people per location are also available. Prices are falling rapidly but you will probably have to pay at least €10,000 per system. The equipment can be mounted on a trolley and moved about to wherever it is needed. There are also 'bargain basement' solutions that will turn desktop PCs into videoconference terminals for a few hundred Euro; however these are only suitable for one or, at most, two participants per terminal. As well as the cost of the equipment you need to consider the communications costs of a videoconference. The very minimum requirement is a basic rate ISDN

#### Key messages for SMEs

- The use of a messaging service is essential if you are not to miss calls.
- If you use mobile phones, look at how SMS can help you exchange information and keep in touch.
- Audio conferences are easy to set up and can save travelling costs for routine discussions.
- Video conferences are still rather limited in their usefulness, but it is easy to add a basic video picture to a conference with a PC and ISDN.

connection and, if there are going to be several participants at each location, you will need links operating at 384kbit/s or above. As with audioconferences, there are service providers who will arrange the multipoint interconnections needed to set up the conferences.

**Data conferences** offer participants the ability to exchange, transfer and work collaboratively on a set of documents or other applications, such as a shared whiteboard or a design tool. Most videoconference and some audioconference providers offer a data conferencing facility as either part of the basic package or as an optional extra.



*NetMeeting whiteboard*

There is a do-it-yourself PC-based solution to conferencing using services such as Microsoft's **NetMeeting**, the software for which comes with the Windows operating system. Each participant has to connect his or her PC over the Internet to a specialised server. Assuming that the PC has the right sound capabilities, the participants can then talk to each other via their PCs. However, the main advantage of this service is that participants can also share files or work on a shared 'whiteboard' during the conference. NetMeeting also offers suitably equipped PCs the option of sharing relatively low quality video images.

## ***Advantages and Disadvantages***

Voice messaging services are widely, and cheaply available. They allow callers to leave messages when nobody is there or the phone is in use on another call.

SMS on mobile phones is a good way of sending short text messages from any location in Europe to any other (as long as there is a GSM network there).

3-way voice conferences can be set up from almost any phone and are cheap. Voice conference calls involving more participants need a conference service provider but are easy to arrange. Voice conferences with a large number of participants can be difficult to manage because the usual visual signals that show who wants to speak and who is agreeing/disagreeing are absent. They are therefore best suited for routine, non-controversial discussions with groups no bigger than 10.

Video conferencing adds on the "body language" but needs expensive equipment and a fast connection (e.g. ADSL) to be effective. Very basic video conferencing can be achieved with a PC and an ISDN connection but users debate the value added by these relatively low quality images. Many people consider that data conferencing, which provides participants with the ability to exchange, transfer and work collaboratively on a set of documents or other applications offers greater added value than video images.

## ***What to buy***

The company that provides your telephone service or your mobile phone service will be able to tell you about the messaging services they can supply. Sometimes simple voice messaging is provided as part of the basic service package but even the more sophisticated services are unlikely to cost more than € per month.

Text messaging on mobile phones within a country is generally cheap, e.g. €0.15 a message. Between countries it is more expensive but it is still cheaper than making international voice calls using mobile phones.

Your telephone service provider is likely to provide audio conferencing services. Other companies also provide audio conferencing services and will advertise locally. Some of them may also offer data conferencing facilities as part of or as an add-on to the basic audioconference.

As mentioned earlier, specialist video conferencing equipment can be expensive and you need to assess whether the savings on travel will justify the cost. Companies that can provide this service and the equipment to support it will advertise in your national business press. Some of them will also rent you the terminal equipment on a daily basis and others have conferencing rooms that you can rent by the hour.

DIY solutions using, for example, NetMeeting only need your PC to have a sound card, microphone and speakers. You can add a basic video camera for about €50 if you want, but do not expect good pictures unless you have a broadband connection. Indeed you probably need an ISDN connection to

guarantee good quality sound. The charges may simply be the normal charges for use of the Internet, although some service providers offer a similar service with more facilities for which they would charge, typically, €0.80 per minute per user.

### ***Questions to ask suppliers***

For voice messaging services, apart from the cost, you may also want to know:

- Can I record a personalised greeting and can that greeting include sub-menus for different people or departments in my company?
- For how long are the messages stored and is there a limit to the number of messages which you will store
- Can I access my messages from any telephone?

For conferencing services, apart from the cost, you may also want to know;

- Does the service provider contact the participants or do they have to dial the service provider?
- How far ahead do I need to book a conference?
- If one of the links fails during a conference, how can that participant rejoin the conference?
- What facilities can you offer, over and above a multi-site audio connection?
- What extra hardware or software do I need to deliver these facilities?
- Can I rent this on a per-session basis or do I have to buy it outright?
- Can you demonstrate your services in a meeting scenario that is typical for my company?