

## Phones, answering machines and faxes

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

The ordinary telephone can easily be overlooked as a means of improving flexibility in the way you work. However, when used intelligently with other devices such as answering machines and faxes, the phone can provide you with much more than simple two-way speech.

If the phone is also connected to network-based services, such as messaging, then the flexibility is further enhanced. These services are covered in the briefing on “Messaging and Conferencing Services”.

If you use a cordless phone, you can make and receive calls anywhere within about 100 to 200m of your phone’s base station, i.e. the fixed part that plugs into the phone socket. This means that there is no need to be tied to one location in the building. Intercom facilities are also available between these phones (generally up to 6 – 8 handsets), making it easy to transfer calls from one user to another or for users to talk to each other, wherever they are in the building. To get the greatest flexibility in the use of these phones, and the best sound quality, you should look for one labelled ‘digital’ or ‘DECT’.

If you are not able to answer your phone, the best approach is to have your phone diverted to someone who can deal with any calls or at least take messages for you. However, in a small business, this will not always be possible. The combination of a phone and an intelligent answering machine makes it possible to supply information to callers and to take their messages when nobody is available to take calls directly. Answering machines are available which have a simple menu system to let the caller select whether they want to leave a message for a specific department, choose from the available (recorded) information, or simply leave a general enquiry. These can easily be set up by the average SME, either on individual extensions or on the extension that calls are diverted to if the switchboard is not staffed. Most telephone service providers will also send the caller’s phone number to the phone/answering machine so that it can automatically record what number called and when.

Fax machines are often used to simply send documents from one machine to another in much the same way as a phone call would be made. However, most fax machines provide other facilities which allow much more flexible use. For instance:

- **Fax forwarding** – where the fax machine stores the received fax in memory and then forwards it to another pre-programmed number.
- **Fax storage** – where the fax machine stores the received fax in memory and allows you to dial in from another fax machine to retrieve the fax.
- **Polling** - where a fax machine can be set up to ‘poll’ or interrogate other fax machines at a pre-set time to retrieve information from them. This can be useful to collect, for example, daily reports at the end of the day from other sites.
- **Broadcasting** – where a fax machine can be set up to send the same message to a series of other fax machines at a pre-set time. This could, for instance, be used to send out press releases to local newspapers and TV stations.

All fax machines used to print on thermal paper, which did not store well and was affected by sunlight. Plain paper fax machines, which produce better copies, have been around for some time but, until recently, were significantly more expensive. However advances in printer technology have reduced the price gap to the point where thermal paper fax machines have almost disappeared from the market.

For a small SME, a combined phone, fax and answering machine can be very useful, since it provides all of these functions in one device and takes up less space than separate machines. These combined devices often contain the most versatile answering machines. Most of them can also be used as simple photocopiers and some can be connected to your PC to work as a (relatively low quality) printer and/or scanner. However, it is always wise

#### Key messages for SMEs

- Look at the phones and faxes you already have and think about how they could be used more intelligently.
- Read the manual that came with them. Most answering machines and faxes have facilities on them that we ignored when we first got the machine but could now be extremely useful.



*Combined phone, fax and answering machine*

to also have a separate basic phone that you can use if the combined phone/fax/answering machine fails.

### ***Advantages and Disadvantages***

Phones, answering machines and faxes are commonly available and cost relatively little. If used intelligently, they can be a good way of flexibly providing and receiving small amounts of information.

The quality of print on fax machines is still much lower than on most printers, and they are a slow way of transferring large documents. However, they are a very quick way of transferring short documents when they cannot be sent electronically (e.g. by e-mail).

### ***What to buy***

The best place to get advice on phones, faxes and answering machines is from a local specialist supplier. Many mail order (or internet based) suppliers also stock a wide range of these machines if you are confident that you can choose what you want from the list of features given in the catalogue descriptions. The prices you are likely to pay are:

- DECT Phones – from around €60
- Plain paper fax machines – from around €130
- Combined phone, fax and answering machine – from around €170

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

For cordless phones:

- What is the range of the base station
- How many handsets can the base station serve?
- Can calls be transferred between handsets and is there an intercom facility

For answering machines

- Can I access my messages from any telephone?
- What is the limit to the number/length of messages that can be stored?
- Will the machine automatically record the date, time and caller's identity for each message?
- Can I set the machine up with sub-menus for different people or departments in my company?

For fax machines

- What features are included in this machine, e.g. polling, forwarding, storage or broadcasting
- What do the consumables (e.g. special paper, ink or toner cartridges) cost and how long should they last?

All these devices are essentially plug-and-play machines that are easy to set up and require very little maintenance. Nevertheless, ask to see the handbook or instruction manual to make sure that it offers clear advice on how to set up the equipment and use the various features.