

In search of free phone service

This month I'm going to spend some time digging into the world of Internet phone services. We've all seen the ads for the various commercial services (Rogers Internet Phone, Vonage, etc.) but there are a lot of other options out there as well. Internet connections have reached the point where they're fast and reliable enough to use for voice communication and a number of different services are now available to take advantage of those fast connections.

This is certainly not going to be a complete list, but it will explore some different kinds of products and give you some ideas about some cool new things that can help you stay in touch with friends and family or other team members.

Staying in touch on the road

There are a handful of different services that allow you to use your PC as a phone. The most common of these are Skype, Google Talk, and Yahoo! Voice, and they're all similar in how they work. The idea of using a PC as a phone has been around since the '70s, but these services take that idea to the next level by integrating a phone with instant messaging and other functions.

In many ways similar to the Internet phones you can get installed at your house, these services require only a PC (or Mac) and an Internet connection. You install the software, plug in a headset, and voilà you've got a phone. Unlike other Internet phones, however, these PC-based phones aren't trapped in your house – if you install them in your laptop, then anywhere you take your laptop (and plug it into the Internet), you've got a working phone.

Interesting, but a cell phone already does that, right?

Right, but these services are way cheaper than any cell phone. In many cases, they're free – with all of them you can call other users of the same service for free. So, for instance, if you're using Skype, you can call other Skype users for free. You have to pay if you want to call land lines or mobile phones, but the price averages about \$3 a month,



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which is really cheap. That \$3 also gets you things like a dedicated phone number and voicemail, so it's a pretty good deal.

All of these services are still a little clunky to use, and they're not quite as reliable as the public phone system, but they're improving quickly. And for that price, it's easy to overlook the occasional hiccup.

Using a different approach altogether, Jaxtr is technically not an Internet phone service at all. With Jaxtr, you use regular phones (land lines or cell phones) but take advantage of the Internet to

avoid long distance charges. I like this one already!

To use this service, you register with Jaxtr and setup an account (basically you give them your name and the phone number you want tied to the service). Jaxtr gives you a contact link that you can post on a web page (including MySpace, Facebook and other similar sites) or email to people. People click the link to initiate a call with you. When they click that link, they enter their phone number and Jaxtr rings them. When they pickup the call, Jaxtr rings your number. If you pickup, Jaxtr connects you to your caller. If not, Jaxtr leaves you a message.

There are a couple of things that are really cool about this. First, Jaxtr never gives out your phone number – callers click a link and Jaxtr calls you on their behalf – so you maintain your privacy.

Secondly, since Jaxtr calls you and uses local access numbers, you never have long distance charges.

These are compelling features and Jaxtr is definitely catching on. It's still a fairly new service but already has over a million subscribers.

For anyone with family overseas, this is a tremendous service. Jaxtr currently works in more than 50 coun-

tries and they're adding new ones all the time.

Jaxtr is also completely free right now. Of course, that won't last forever and at some point they'll likely start filling it with ads to generate some revenue. In the meantime, though, it's a great service.

“With Jaxtr, you use regular phones but take advantage of the Internet to avoid long distance charges. I like this one already!”

Staying in touch at the office

In addition to the phone services, there are also starting to be a number of Internet based meeting tools that allow you to communicate with team members in distant locations. While these aren't Internet phone services per se, they do allow you to stay in touch easily and very cheaply.

Some of you may have experienced online seminars using services such as Webex, Elluminate, or Genesys, but the most pop-

ular (and cost-effective) service right now is GoToMeeting.

With GoToMeeting, you schedule and run meetings entirely online. Participants join the meeting by clicking a link you provide them (GoToMeeting actually sends them the link when

out across multiple terminals, or even for running impromptu meetings with small groups of drivers that are on the road. If people are available at the same time, but in different locations, it's an easy way to take advantage of that and get together (virtually, at least).

GoToMeeting is also very cheap. A basic subscription lets you run unlimited meetings with up to 15 participants each time, and costs \$50/month. If you want to have meetings with more than 15 people at a time, it's \$99/month.

But wait, there's more!

This is by no means a complete list of Internet phone and communication services, but these are all useful tools to start with. A quick Google search for 'Internet phone service' shows dozens of different tools, all with different functions, target markets, and price points. Of course, I'm always interested in hearing about what else is out there, so let me know if you come across any other cool services.

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Comparing Internet Phones

	Jaxtr	Skype, Yahoo! Voice, Google Talk	GoToMeeting
Description	Links your phone to the web	Turns your PC into a phone	Facilitates online meetings and conference calls
What's cool	Free international calls; Number stays private	Cheaper than cellphone; free calls to other users of the same service	Attend meetings without having to attend meetings;
What's not cool	May not last long as a free service	Need PC and Internet for phone to work; 911 and other emergency services don't work	Conference call feature requires a regular phone in most cases
Best for	Reaching international contacts	Low cost mobile communications	Meetings with team members in different locations
Price	Free	All three about the same – call other users of the same service for free, call land lines for a couple dollars a month (no LD charges)	\$50/month for unlimited meetings with up to 15 attendees per meeting. \$99/month for more than 15 attendees
More info	www.jaxtr.com	www.skype.com www.google.com/talk voice.yahoo.com	www.gotomeeting.com



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