Why phones fail: a guide to getting help faster

"This line is no longer in service."

For almost any business, a failing phone system is more than a technological headache — it's a potentially crippling existential crisis. One of the biggest challenges is, of course, diagnosing the exact problem. Phone systems don't always fail in one catastrophic explosion of silicone and plastic. But rather they slowly fall apart in ever-increasing increments; just enough to aggravate your staff and send potential customers to your competitors.

A phone system is, in essence, a complex computer network. So finding the true cause of your problems often takes a bit of investigation. Understanding where systems are likely fail can help you have a much better conversation with your service technician and, hopefully, get your phones up and running faster.

The ghost in the machine

Many people who call our service desk looking for help describe their issues as a sequence of strange behaviors. A service technician has been out four times in the last month to fix the same problem. Calls come in but no one can call out. You call one extension and someone else's phone rings; issues that might be humorous if the implications weren't so serious.

In every case, these symptoms are a warning that your system may soon shut down for good. With a little knowledge, you might be able to avoid such a catastrophic situation.

Where does the problem reside?

The first thing to understand is if the problem is in your system or with your carrier. The key is to make good notes about the behavior of your phone system. Note what fails and when. The more specific your observations, the easier it will be to diagnose the technical problem.

Is it more than one unit failing? Do multiple units fail at once or is the outage more sporadic? With large scale failures, the first place to look is with your carrier, though hardware problems could be the root cause.

Are you getting alerts on a regular basis? Do you get the same alert or do they vary? If you clear an alert but it keeps coming back, that could indicate a much deeper problem.

Your phone system's hard drive, like the hard drives on your computer, is subject to failure. In general, hard drives don't like heat. When temperatures go higher than the mid-70s, things can start acting flakey. Brown outs and surges can damage equipment.

The hunt for clues

When your system fails and you call looking for help, we'll start simple. Does the display on your phone look normal? Are the icons that are normally there present? Can you make internal calls? Can you access your voicemail?

Are you getting alerts on your phone? What do those alerts indicate? If you clear the alerts, do they return?

Can you repeat the problem? This is important because random is harder to diagnose and correct. A problem that repeats gives us the clues we need to track it down.

Make a note of the answers to these questions and you're technician will have an easier time diagnosing your problem.

Some of the more common issues that we see

Memory Leaks: A memory leak is a type of resource leak, a failure in a program to release discarded memory, causing impaired performance or failure. You phone will behave sporadically, what used to work no longer does. Or the phone rings but you can't pick up. Or you get rejected by the board altogether. Voicemails disappear. You go to call one extension and you get another. You pick up and nothing is there. The system may randomly restart. It's like your phone is arguing with you all the time.

Board Failure: With a board failure, you may lose 4-16 phones all at once, while others continue to work. The biggest causes of board failure are electrical surges and spikes, heat, age and occasionally manufacturing defects.

Trunk Failure: You go to call out and get a lot of silence instead. Incoming calls fail to ring through.

Hard drive failure. Like your computer, you phone system features either a hard drive or a SSD (solid-state drive) that runs the system. And just like the hard drive on your computer, these drives are subject to failure over time.

Network failure. A VoIP (voice over internet protocol) essentially rides on your data network. If your network goes down, your phone goes down with it. A well-designed system, of course, has back-up alternatives in place. If your phone is down, the first question to ask is, "are our computers down as well?"

A common problem we see is a client who has recently changed carriers, while keeping their old equipment. If the wiring is moved incorrectly, or the equipment is incompatible, it can be a long, frustrating process to get the entire system working.

Another common problem that happens all too often is what we call a "bad dig." With this, someone accidentally cuts a major data line. Not much can be done to restore normal service but to wait until the cut is repaired. In times like this, a well-conceived back up plan is critical.

Most people don't equate their phone system to a computer network, but it is. And just like your computer, its software systems are updated continually. If your system is old, it may no longer be supported by the manufacturer; eventually your system will not be compatible with the features and functionality you need to operate your business. You might not even be able to get parts anymore. Sounds far fetched, but we see it all time.

Getting help faster

As with most complex problems, the key to getting help when your phone system begins to fail is information. Make notes every time your phone fails and you will help your technician get to the problem faster, which means your business will be back up and running faster.

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