



Can You Hear Me Now?

ALPA gets new phone/voicemail systems.

Promising to help ALPA officers and staff provide better and more efficient service to the Association's members, ALPA is upgrading its telephone and voicemail systems, using Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) technology. The first phase was completed in August at the Association's Herndon, Va., and Washington, D.C., offices, with plans to expand to other ALPA offices during the next 5 years.

VOIP technology sends voice communications over a data network rather than via traditional telephone lines, transmitting conversations as a series of data packets. All telephone switching is done over a computer network. This centralizes administration of the systems and allows easy integration of voice and data applications.

"We're building a platform that will give us the ability to offer superior services to our members at a much lower cost," says Charlie Murphy, director of ALPA's Information Technology and Services Department. "The new system, which will run on ALPA networks and servers, represents a much more consolidated infrastructure than our previous communications systems."

The Association's old voicemail system was installed in the late 1980s and hadn't been upgraded since 1996. The company that produced the old system is no longer in business, severely limiting support and expansion potential for that system. The phone system, which was installed in the early 1990s, also had not been upgraded since 1996.

"We'd been looking at the condition of our communications infrastructure, and we realized that our telephone system was reaching the end of its useful life," says Jalmer Johnson, ALPA's general manager. "The maintenance contracts for our PBX and voicemail

systems were running out, and those systems were becoming increasingly expensive because of the rising cost of service and maintenance."

The Association already had some experience with VOIP. When the United MEC moved its office in October 2004, ALPA installed a state-of-the-art VOIP system in the new office. That gave ALPA staff an opportunity to test



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the system, study how it worked, and assess its broader applicability for the Association.

The new phone and voicemail systems are already saving the Association approximately \$2,000 to \$3,000 a month because of the need for fewer landlines and reduced maintenance costs. Additionally, calls between ALPA offices with VOIP no longer accrue long-distance charges because they are transmitted over the Internet rather than over regular telephone lines. The Association hopes to realize additional cost savings over time as other ALPA offices upgrade to VOIP.

But a reduction in cost is not the only benefit that the new systems pro-

vide. Because of the flexibility of VOIP, ALPA will now be able to reroute calls when necessary to allow for better use of Association resources, respond more quickly to system failures, and more easily set up phone pools and strike centers.

"We often get very short notice to set up a strike office, so the flexibility that VOIP gives us is a huge benefit," says Murphy. "All that is needed is a data network and an Internet connection. We won't need to install traditional telephone lines or to coordinate with the phone company."

"The ability to plug into the Internet and use an already-existing VOIP infrastructure to quickly set up office or strike center communications is invaluable to ALPA as an organization," Murphy says.

The upgraded phone and voicemail have numerous other advantages over ALPA's previous communications systems, including

- caller ID capability for outside calls;
- expanded speed-dial capacity, allowing users to link into a phone directory over the Internet or on their computer and dial phone numbers from a point-and-click interface;
- e-mail alerts for voicemail messages;
- mobile capability, allowing users to use the system remotely over the Internet from a laptop computer; and
- system redundancy, which should maximize availability of telephone and voicemail services.

"As we expand this upgrade to other ALPA offices, we'll be looking closely at integrating these systems with software applications resident on computers or over the Internet," says Johnson. "The ability that VOIP gives us to connect with other aspects of our information systems gives us the potential to make processing Association business a lot easier and to give ALPA pilots much better value in terms of member services." —Gavin Francis, Staff Writer