

Is Linux Voice over IP Ready?

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What is Voice over IP really? What do you need for Voice over IP? What do you mean, I can't call my girlfriend? What's all that buzz about open and proprietary protocols? Can I start my own telecom service? This article addresses these questions and compares the most popular Linux applications for calling and conferencing.

Internet or digital telephony, or Voice over IP, often abbreviated as VoIP, allows parties to exchange voice data streams over the network. The big difference is that with VoIP the data flows over a general-purpose network, the Internet, whereas conventional telephony uses a dedicated network of voice transmission lines.

Under special circumstances, a VoIP network can be connected with the conventional telephone network. However, at the time of this writing, that is certainly not the standard. In other words, it is likely you will not be able to call people who are using a conventional telephone. Although currently various applications are available, both free and proprietary, telephony over the Internet has some major drawbacks. Most noticeably, the system is unreliable, it can be slow, or there can be a lot of noise on the connection. Therefore, it cannot be used to replace conventional telephony. Think about emergency calls, for instance. Although some providers take some precautions, there is no guarantee you will be able to reach the party you want to call. This is worsened, because in VoIP, there is no agreement yet on a standard for assigning numbers, like the E.164 standard we have for assigning and identifying traditional land lines and mobile phone numbers.

Even if there is some form of integration between VoIP and conventional telephony networks, this is still different for mobile networks. The major problem is that wireless network coverage is not as well developed as cellular network coverage. Additionally, there is the issue of costs when accessing the Internet from your mobile phone. For me, it would amount to 0.50 EUR (+/- \$.60 US) per 100K of traffic. It is possible that integration of VoIP in the third-generation telephony network will ease these troubles.

You also should be aware that there is no encryption in VoIP. So, it is fairly easy for anyone to eavesdrop on conversations.

The bottom line is although VoIP is useful, it is not a replacement for land-line telephony (yet).

Let's look at what you'll need to get VoIP up and running.

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