

# Internet Phone: Smirkingly Cheap

Take advantage of the Internet's global reach, and pay a fraction of conventional phone rates.

For those who take a special delight in finding a great bargain, Internet telephone service—or Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP)—is a no-brainer. For \$30 per month or less, there are hordes of Internet-based phone companies out there just dying to help you shirk the shackles of the conventional phone Goliaths, and let you gab till you drop.

Essentially, these upstart service providers can bring you bargain-basement rates by taking advantage of the tremendous reach of the Internet, which can now be used to easily transmit and receive phone calls all over the world. Even better: The unreliable sound quality that used to plague such services is quickly becoming a fading memory. Plus, you'll find that service providers are taking great pains to help you migrate to Internet phone with minimal agony.

With most plans, all you'll need are broadband Internet access and an Analog Telephone Adapter (ATA)—which is used to hook a conventional land-line phone to a computer to make Internet calls. (Lucky for you, most providers include an ATA when you sign up for their service.) With an ATA, your phone service will be tethered to a PC. But many users get around that situation by plugging a cordless-phone base to their PC and then placing satellite cordless-phone handsets throughout their homes.

Of course, there's a downside. Some of the bottom-of-the-barrel Internet phone service providers do not offer a 9-1-1 emergency phone call service. And if your PC goes down, or your electric company pulls an "Enron" on you, you'll have to consider two cans and a string until those technologies get back online. Still, those drawbacks haven't stopped millions of users from turn-

ing to the Internet and reducing the cost of their monthly local and long-distance phone bills to a few—and often crumply—Alexander Hamiltons. Here's a sampling of the best the market has to offer right now:

**Skype™** ([www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com)): Before you part with any coin for Internet phone, you may want to try out this free service. A simple piece of software you can download to your PC in a matter of minutes, Skype enables you to call any other Skype user in the world, for free. And given that there are already 59 million Skype users worldwide, that's saying something.

The downside with Skype is that you'll have to use your PC headphones and microphone to make calls over the Web—or purchase a special Web-enabled phone that will allow you to make calls. If you want to call people who are not on the Skype network, you'll have to pay rates similar to those being charged by fee-based Internet phone providers. Still, you'll probably find it hard to gripe about a service that lets you yack it up for as long as you'd like with another Skype user in say, India, without having to fork over a single rupee.

**AOL TotalTalk™** ([www.totaltalk.com/getstarted.adp](http://www.totaltalk.com/getstarted.adp)): AOL is a great way to go if you're already a subscriber to the service and you're looking to get set up with minimum hassle. The company prides itself on offering an extremely user-friendly interface, and TotalTalk makes good on the image. Sound quality is comparable to that of a land-line phone, and the service comes with a number of standard features, including voicemail, 3-way calling, Caller ID, call waiting and call forwarding. You'll also be able to check your voicemail from your online AOL account if you'd like. And with AOL Call Alert, you'll be able to see who's calling you when you're online and decide if you're going to pick up. Another perk: AOL lets you transfer your existing phone number over to the service.

The downside is that you need to be a

subscriber to AOL's basic Internet service to get TotalTalk. That means you'll need to pay at least \$10/month for basic Internet from AOL on top of charges for the TotalTalk phone service.

Most users will probably opt for TotalTalk's \$29.99 plan, which offers unlimited calls to anywhere in the U.S. and Canada. For an extra 5 bucks, there are discounts on long-distance calls to other countries. And a less expensive plan, at \$18.99/month, features unlimited local calls, with long distance at 4 cents/minute.

**Vonage®** ([www.vonage.com](http://www.vonage.com)): A pioneer of Internet phone, Vonage also offers sound quality comparable to that of a land-line phone. The service is very similar to AOL's, offering such features as voicemail, call waiting, call forwarding, Caller ID and 3-way calling. Plus, they're not looking to tie you up with an annual contract. With Vonage, it's pay as you go, month-to-month. The company recently passed the one-million-paying-customers mark, so they must be doing something right.

One of Vonage's major advantages is its varied pricing plans. If your current phone sees only modest usage, you may be able to get away with Basic 500 service, which offers 500 minutes of calls to anywhere in the U.S., Canada and Puerto Rico for \$14.99/month. For another 10 bucks, you can talk to the same locations forever. Vonage also has a service called Small Business Basic, which gives you 1,500 minutes to the same locations for \$39.99, and Small Business Unlimited, featuring unlimited calling to the same locations for \$49.99.

Another major advantage with Vonage is that its phone adapter is sold at many brick-and-mortar retailer locations, including Best Buy and Staples. So with this company, you'll be able to talk face to face with a knowledgeable in-store tech person before plunging into the world of Internet phone. Yet another advantage: Vonage's phone adapter is so small, you can easily take it with you on a trip and

make Vonage calls wirelessly from your laptop. Pretty cool.

The downside of Vonage is that other, lesser-known rivals sometimes offer cheaper rates—although sound quality may not be as good.

**AT&T CallVantage®** ([www.usa.att.com/callvantage/plans/index.jsp](http://www.usa.att.com/callvantage/plans/index.jsp)): You'd probably expect land-line sound quality and myriad service features from the company that was once the Big Foot of telecommunications, and with AT&T's service, you'd be right on.

Like Vonage, AT&T offers a number of pricing plans—although the deals are not as sweet. Moderate phone users can sign on for as little as \$19.99/month, which gets you unlimited local calling only. If you want to keep in touch with your Aunt Nelly or anyone else long distance, be ready to pony up 4 cents/minute. Bump up your commitment to \$29.99/month, and you can make unlimited calls throughout the U.S. and Canada and see a 50% savings over AT&T rates to other countries. Meanwhile, AT&T's Big Kahuna \$49.99/month offering—AT&T CallVantage Small Office Plan—gives you unlimited calling in the U.S. and Canada, as well as a second line with an additional 500 minutes/month that you can use for faxing.

As with Vonage, the downside here is that the service is pricey compared to some others. And as with Vonage, few offer the sound clarity of AT&T.

*Joe Dysart is an Internet speaker and business consultant based in Thousand Oaks, California. He can be reached at [joe@joedysart.com](mailto:joe@joedysart.com) or on the Web: [www.joedysart.com](http://www.joedysart.com).*

© 2006 by IDEA Health & Fitness Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction without permission is strictly prohibited.