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## All-Star VoIP Products: 40 VoIP Applications, Tools and Services That Take VoIP Mainstream

The best consumer VoIP tools for end users, residences and small offices.

**Owen Linderholm** on **February 26, 2008**

The last year has seen tremendous growth in the availability of residential VoIP resources and services, despite **SunRocket Inc.'s notable collapse** and **Vonage's extremely well-publicized troubles**. Instead, the growth has been in nontraditional services — add-ons, voice utilities and voice applications — the very kinds of things that the **Voice 2.0** movement is all about.

Broadly speaking, these services and tools fall into a set of categories. The biggest is free desktop VoIP/messaging services. Then comes a host of services designed to tie the VoIP world in with the mobile world — either by delivering low cost VoIP services to mobile phones or by connecting mobile phones to a more comprehensive array of IP-based services. The third category deals with managing messages — be they voice, IM (instant messages) email or something else — and bringing multiple services together in a controlled way. The fourth is paid residential VoIP service, which aims to eliminate the traditional landline forever. And the final category is a miscellaneous grab bag of hardware devices and services that defy categorization.

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**Free Desktop VoIP/Messaging Services**

**(Editor's Note: This list includes only those programs that are capable of connecting to the regular phone network.)**

**Skype**

There is no question that **Skype Ltd**. is the leader is in this category. Despite a relatively poor year that saw **lots of pointed questions being asked about its operations**, it is hard to argue with Skype's 246 million registered users (8 million or so of which use the service at any given moment). Skype provides voice calling, IM, video calling, conference calling, calls in from the regular phone network, calls out to the regular phone network, file

transfers, money transfers, voice mail and more. Plenty of **add-ons**, peripherals, plug-ins and the like exist for the service.

### Gizmo

Gizmo is possibly Skype's closest rival. It has very similar features with a slightly more aggressive approach to free calling, with free voice mail and the ability to send some calls out to landlines for free. Gizmo lacks video, but it does offer the ability to use the service on a moderately wide set of mobile phones, which can help you reduce mobile phone call costs. You also can record all calls for free.

### Yahoo! Messenger

One of the big sleepers in free VoIP services is Yahoo! Inc.'s Messenger. Originally an IM tool, this application quietly got into VoIP in a big way about two years ago and provides features that match those of most other free VoIP services. To boot, Yahoo! Messenger boasts good integration with other Yahoo services, including email and Yahoo's radio-streaming services. In other words, you can listen to streaming audio and seamlessly drop in and out of calls. The tool also has very high-quality presence-indication applications.

### AIM

Very similar to Yahoo! Messenger in most respects, AIM's integration with IM services is better because the AIM client has the largest IM user base. But many of the additional tools, like presence and music, are not available or not as well integrated.

### JAJAH

**Jajah** is a suite of Web-based phone services. The first and most popular is a service that lets you use a Web browser to connect any two phones. Go to the site, enter your number and the number of the person you are calling, and the system connects you both. There are similar services for "'click-to-call" buttons and conference calls as well. Rates, as with most VoIP-based services, range from free to relatively cheap.

### VoIP Buster

VoIP Buster is a bit of a hybrid. It uses a model that is a lot like Skype but has some advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is that VoIP Buster is SIP (Session Initiation Protocol)-based, making it more compatible than Skype. Another perk is that it offers more in the way of free outbound calling to regular phones. (However, "more" doesn't mean "free" — you essentially get the first four months free as long as you buy the plan first.) Disadvantages include fewer additional services or features; VoIP Buster is for phone calls and chat, plain and simple.

### WengoPhone

WengoPhone is a relative newcomer to the client voice and IM-software space. The small company is based in France, but it is trying to catch up by offering some clear differentiation. The biggest advantage WengoPhone boasts is that its IM service works with multiple IM clients such as, Google Talk, Yahoo or AIM. Outbound calls are supported, with rates that are comparable to other services, despite being priced in euros. Voice mail and other features are under

development.

### ooVoo

OoVoo offers free video conferencing, which just about says it all. OoVoo is something of a latecomer to the space, and while it is very slick and free, it doesn't necessarily offer anything more than other existing services.

### SightSpeed

SightSpeed is another video calling application, but it is fairly mature and offers a range of tools, from free video chat with other users to more robust, business-level video conferencing with advanced features like recording.

### PhoneGnome

PhoneGnome is a little different from many of the other services in that it offers several advanced features like recording of all calls and integration with other services — both SIP and Skype. But for the best level of features, users are encouraged to buy a $100 box that can enable several of the more advanced options. PhoneGnome includes client software that can run on many brands of mobile phone and enables the service for them — as long as a data plan is available.

### Raketu

It can be hard to believe that this service is real and worthwhile, since the interface and some of the language used to describe it are very challenging. But if you persevere with this Skype-like service, you get more features than you would from just about any other service, including mobile support, streaming TV and lots more.).

**Add-Ons and Extra Services**

### GrandCentral

GrandCentral had such an impact on the VoIP world and in the integration of telephony and online tools that **it was acquired last year by Google**. The easiest way to describe GrandCentral is as a single service to consolidate all your phones. You get a Grand Central number, and when someone call is, the service rings all your phones, or maybe only some phones based on rules that you create. GrandCentral gives you one voice mailbox, where you can screen calls live or automatically block telemarketers. There are *many* features and additions for GrandCentral.

### Zfone

Zfone is basically secure VoIP. It **encrypts calls using technology developed by Phil Zimmermann**, the inventor of the most successful encryption technology, PGP (Pretty Good Privacy). You can use Zfone as a plug-in for existing softphone clients and for SIP devices. Zfone is a must-have for VoIP users who require guaranteed secure communications. Using Zfone is actually the *most* secure way you can have any sort of phone conversation.

### MOBIVOX

MOBIVOX uses the Internet and VoIP technology to interconnect members, whether they are using a VoIP phone, a landline, a mobile phone or even Skype. Calls to members are completely free, and calls to external lines have varying rates that are generally low. One of the advantages of MOBIVOX is

that it can be used without a computer and works from any phone, since it uses voice recognition to control the system. For example, dial the local MOBIVOX number, and if you call from a registered phone, the service will already know who you are. Then simply say the name of the person that you want to call, and MOBIVOX connects you.

### Truphone

Truphone is one of the first VoIP add-ons for mobile phones. It is an application/service that runs on many advanced mobile phones and brings the power of VoIP (and the savings) to them. It also uses **wifi** as a replacement when a signal is available and includes free calling to all other Truphone users.

### Jangl

**Jangl** is essentially a privacy service. It uses email addresses to identify people and assigns local phone numbers for each party to call and either leave voice mail or connect to one another directly. The real phone number(s) associated are not revealed to either party. The service is clearly a big help for online classified, Craigslist and eBay users.

### Ribbit Corp.

Ribbit is a brand-new VoIP service that is still in beta. In many ways, it appears to be a typical second-generation VoIP/Web company in that it is trying to take a step forward by bringing many first-generation services together into a single service. The company's success will likely depend on how well it manages to do this.

### Ccube Inc.

Ccube is another number anonymizing service that is specifically designed for users of social networking and classified-ad sites. It includes a click-to-call widget/button that members can put on listings and sites, but it doesn't have the ability to associate anonymous numbers with email addresses like Jangl does. Ccube gives you 60 minutes per month for free but additional time costs.

### Iotum FREE Conference Calls for Facebook

More conference calling, but this time for free and from within Facebook no less. Iotum Inc., the company behind FREE Conference Calls for Facebook, has done a great job of making the application integrate into the social-networking site, and all the controls for managing a conference are built in to that conference's Facebook page.

### TalkPlus Inc.

**TalkPlus** provides a second number for an existing phone line — even (especially) a mobile phone — so that you can use one device to separate out your business and home life. The service supports most mobile phones and also provides voice mail and voice-mail-to-email services.

### EQO

EQO is one of several VoIP-for-mobile-phone applications that have sprung up in the last two years. It is essentially an application that runs on many (but not all) mobile phones, uses a data plan to connect to

the Internet, and uses VoIP to make calls rather than using the underlying cell carrier's voice network. This saves money on calls — especially international ones — and lets that service provider add in some extra features. In the case of EQO, this basically means that you can IM from your mobile phone.

### Rebtel

Rebtel is an interesting take on using VoIP to make mobile calling cheaper, particularly international calls. Rather than forcing users to download an application to or call a local switchboard to connect them, Rebtel assigns you a local number for each contact you set up, then connects from that local number via the internet to a local number to the destination of the call. The service works in 40 countries.

### Talkster

Talkster is so similar to Rebtel that it is hard to bring up many differences. Talkster allows group calling with up to five simultaneous users on a call, and it works in slightly fewer countries: 26. Of course, whether you're using Talkster or Rebtel, you'll want to make sure that the service covers the countries you want to call ...

### Jaxtr

Jaxtr is yet another phone privacy service — it works with any phone and anonymizes your number by building a bridge between your phone and the phone of the person you want to call (or who is calling you). The service is free for now but may not remain so. You can also create a widget that you can embed on any Web page that allows people to call you without knowing your number. They click, enter their own number, and Jaxtr calls both parties immediately.

### Rondee

Rondee is a tiny company in San Diego that provides high-quality, Web-scheduled conference calls for free. High-end features like call recording and in-call controls are included, and about the only catch is that participants must make all calls to a San Diego-area number, which may incur long distance charges for many.

### TalkShoe

TalkShoe is a little hard to describe. It is a service designed to allow any user to create an online, live, call-in podcast that any number of people can call in to listen live. Participants can also hold a conference call. TalkShoe offers tools for chatting and sharing files, and you can archive and stream the final result on demand. You can also create Web-based widgets to link to shows from other sites. Calls can be made over the internet using a Web client, via any SIP device, via Skype or from regular phones. Skype has a similar service called Skypecast, but it has fewer features and infrastructure to support the calls.

### drop.io

Drop.io is not really a VoIP service, but it is a useful add-on to know about. Drop.io is actually a site where users can store files, images, links and so on. But drop.io has added a new feature: the ability to link a particular drop to a local phone number and have all calls made to

that number recorded as an MP3 file. So you can now add recording to any other telephony service by three-way conference calling the number of your choice into a call that you make.

### GotVoice Inc.

GotVoice is a single-function VoIP service that works with any phone. It converts your voice mail to text, then allows you to email, text or IM it to a person of your choice. The service costs $9.95 per month, but there is a free two-week trial.

### Vumber

**Vumber** is a brand-new service that provides the user with a completely anonymous number that maps to their real number. Users call out from any phone into the Vumber service, then call any other number , and the recipient only sees the allocated Vumber — not the caller's real number. And if someone else calls in to your allocated Vvumber, you can choose how the service should handle it: answer, go to voice mail, give a busy signal, tell the caller that the number is out of service or play a custom message. The service is not free

**Paid Residential VoIP Service**

### Vonage

**Vonage** is the residential **VoIP service provider** that people love to hate. It's also by far the biggest provider outside of the cable/telco block. The problem for customers is a long series of political, legal and financial setbacks that have bedeviled Vonage for the past year. Most of these issues have been resolved, but many questions remain about the company's long-term viability. Customers either love or hate Vonage, with some swearing by perfect service and others damning it. The reasons to go with Vonage are that it clearly works, the company has momentum and a large group of customers and it is big enough to hang in there in a very competitive market.

### Lingo Inc.

**Lingo** is similar to Vonage but much less well-known. It is owned by Canadian telco giant Primus Telecommunications Inc. and has a good reputation for reliability and customer service. Its biggest claim to fame is that it has extremely cheap plans that provide free calls to 40 countries worldwide. Lingo also has several tiers of plans that will appeal to a broad range of customers.

### Packet8

**Packet8**'s VoIP service is aimed more at the small-business user than the home user, perhaps, but it still provides a robust residential VoIP service with the added bonus that it is even better for home offices or **small businesses** that are run out of the home.

**Cable/DSL Suppliers**

The biggest growth in the VoIP sector is coming from the addition of VoIP services to the offerings from your local cable/DSL broadband supplier. They have an advantage in that you already subscribe to their broadband line, so they can double up and offer both broadband and VoIP at a discount. (In fact, most broadband providers now offer triple-play packages of broadband, TV and phone service all in one.) In addition, broadband providers tend to have big-company-style service and billing, which can be both a good thing and a bad thing. They won't go

under like SunRocket did last year, but they can be pretty hard to deal with about problems that they don't believe to be their fault.

**Smaller or Less Well-Known Residential VoIP Companies**

The next set of residential VoIP providers can be considered roughly equivalent: They offer ranges of plans and services overall, but when push comes to shove, they are all providing VoIP service over an existing broadband connection — and doing it at a much lower cost than traditional phone service and with more features than either traditional phone service or the cable/DSL providers.

**ViaTalk**

The company currently offers a $9.95-per-month plan with 500 free minutes to anywhere in the U.S. and Canada. Alternatively, you can subscribe to a $200 plan for a full year of unlimited calling and get an extra year thrown in for free.

**VoicePulse Inc.**

VoicePulse offers an upgrade path to businesses via some integration into **Asterisk IP PBX** systems, and it also includes advanced residential call features like filtering and telemarketer blocking.

**Quantumvoice.com**

Quantumvoice.com's primary differentiator is that it offers standard plans — even residential — that include toll-free numbers for inbound calls, which can be useful for home-based businesses or those with very far-flung families.

**Broadvoice**

BroadVoice is slightly larger than some of the other residential VoIP companies, and its current differentiator is that subscribers get sent *free* video phone. And yes, the phone does work ...

**rocketVoIP**

RocketVoIP includes international calling minutes even with its most basic $10 per month plan. You don't get unlimited international calls, but even so, this makes the company's low-end offers very attractive.

**Phones**

Most VoIP services are explicitly designed to work with existing equipment because decades of development have gone into optimizing regular phone equipment. This basically means that whatever phone you have now is likely to be better than any VoIP-specific phone you could buy. At least, this is true in the residential market. In the business market, there are many new, advanced features that come with VoIP, so you are usually better off getting an IP-specific phone just so you can use them.

At the other end of the spectrum, with cutting-edge, no-interface-with-the-old-phone-system VoIP, you are faced with two possibilities. One is that you are using a mobile phone — and again, with a couple of exceptions, you aren't going to be giving up your fancy phone. The other is that you