

Another Lesson in VoIP Ergonomics

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Old dogs sometimes resist change and end up teaching the experts with good reason.

Several weeks ago, I mentioned that **echo is present in every telephony system**. I failed to mention that "being able to hear yourself talk - that is to say when you speak into the telephone handset; this is a 'feature' for many old dogs. Let me say it again another way - for users that are accustomed to speaking into the telephone mouth piece (transmitter) they expect to hear themselves speak through the telephone ear piece (receiver).



A business manager of a medical practice called me to give me a heads up and said one of the doctors noticed a change (yes, I did it) and "could no longer hear himself speak." She went onto say - before you laugh - let me explain. Well, of course I laughed and I understood anyway - but hearing it come from a doctor can be - well, entertaining.

So all week I thought about what we did to plan for the removal of noticeable echo from trunk-to-trunk call transfers across the network. While we were onsite, the good doctor saw us and said "hey Matt, I need to speak to you about our phones." Of course I had fun with him when he told me what I previously heard from the business manager. I still wasn't prepared to remove what we put in place and was still figuring out what we could do so Doc could hear himself speak. Anyway after he lectured me about using the telephone for 46 years and being used to certain things being certain ways - I told him "to take two aspirin and call me in the morning."

We waited until after he left and we examined the software and determined through the process of elimination - the best way to restore that ancient feature of being able to hear one self speak while talking on the telephone. After we figured it out and tested it, the business manager came back to the equipment room and we had her test it too. Now - whatever you do - don't say a word to the Doc about what we did and let's see if he notices any difference.

This isn't quite the course of action you want to take. The user is always right and while Doc was busy doctoring, we were busy trying to undo what we did weeks earlier to remove the echo problems but this time with a twist of not removing what users were used to hearing - themselves talk. Echo cancellation does tend to "flatten" out or add loss so you may find yourselves doing the curly shuffle if you go one step too far as we did.

Back in the mid 1980's, I got hammered by a CEO for not providing a recognizable second dial tone that users normally got when placing outside calls. But sir - it's a digital system. You still dial 9 and although you no longer hear the pause and break in dial tone and then the new second dial tone - you still have the second dial tone. Well, that never fared real well - and my friends at Nortel remember.

In Doc's case, I think we went too far in minimizing echo. We'll find out in the coming days. I'm sure I'm due something out of this too like a free surgical procedure, or perhaps Doc had fun planting a bug in my ear to see if we could back out of where we landed. In either case I've just learned a new trick and another lesson taught to me by one of the grandmasters.

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