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Select Telecom dials up new services

JAY LOOMIS • THE JOURNAL NEWS • JANUARY 10, 2008

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VALHALLA - Mike Durante started in the telephone industry 30 years ago as an 18 year old from the Bronx who took orders for phone equipment and unloaded trucks at a Connecticut warehouse. He later spent 13 years as a technician who installed phones.

Other than a brief stint working at a lumberyard, the telephone business is the only work he has ever done.

"I started at the bottom and worked my way up," Durante said.

These days, Durante, 47, runs his own company. He is president of Select Telecom Inc., a Valhalla-based company that provides telecommunications services for more than 1,700 clients in the Northeast.



Ricky Flores/The Journal News

Mike Durante, left, is president of Select Telecom Inc. in

"It is exciting," Durante said. "Technology keeps changing. You are learning constantly. And you meet a lot of people. It keeps you young."

How much has the technology improved? Technicians who needed 50 wires to hook up a standard business phone 30 years ago can get the job done with only two wires today. A phone system could take two days to install and program in the late 1970s - but only about four hours now. And modern voice-mail systems, which can store messages for about 200 phones on a small computer chip, are a relatively recent phenomenon.

"You didn't have much voice mail back in 1978 or 1979," Durante said. "It was just coming out, and you would pay \$20,000 to \$40,000 for a voice-mail system - a small system that had very little storage. ... When it got full, it could crash the whole system. It was crazy."

One of the biggest recent trends is Internet-based phone systems.

Sales of Internet phone systems to small and medium-sized businesses are projected to grow 19 percent a year from 2005 to 2010, according to InfoTech, an industry consultant. During that five-year period, annual sales of such systems are expected to grow from \$1.4 billion to \$3 billion.

Internet phone service "is becoming more than just a cost-saving solution," Rebecca Swensen, an analyst at research firm IDC, wrote in a report. "Companies are finding that features and functionality are important. Service providers and vendors have an opportunity to help companies see value in those features and more easily translate that value into productivity gains and better business processes all around."

At Select Telecom, phone systems known as Internet protocol account for more than 40 percent of sales, up from 10 percent five years ago.

One of Select's recent customers is H.H. Brown Shoe Co., which sells 18 brands of footwear. H.H. Brown is using the system to link 250 phones at its headquarters in Greenwich, Conn., and an office in Andover, Mass.

With this technology, the offices can communicate and transfer calls to each other. That will cut back on the need for conventional long-distance phone calls and potentially cut H.H. Brown's phone bill by 25 percent, according to Durante.

Another recent customer is Paradigm, a national talent agency that represents actors, musical artists and directors. Select Telecom installed more than 100 Internet-protocol phone systems in Paradigm's New York City office as part of a plan to create a communications network with an office in Beverly Hills, Calif.

"Some companies have older systems," Durante said. "They might have had them for 10 to 15 years and want new technology. They may have opened a second office up, or merged with another company, and they want connectivity between offices."

Businesses typically limit such systems to their internal networks rather than the public Internet, Durante said. One reason is that the quality of calls over the public Internet can be spotty because of bandwidth shortages.

Valhalla. His brother Paul is the company's chief operating officer. Select provides telecommunications services to more than 1,700 clients in the Northeast.

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Another product line for Select Telecom is video surveillance cameras in area schools. The company has provided cameras for school districts in Scarsdale, New Rochelle, Eastchester and Ramapo. It has made proposals to 10 other districts.

"To be honest with you, the parents want it," Durante said. "It gives them the comfort level that when the kid is in the school that there is good security. If the cameras are in the public corridors and watching the doors, you can see who is coming in and coming out. If something happens, the cameras capture it."

Select Telecom has grown from 100 to 1,700 customers during its 12-year history.

Despite the technological advances, some aspects of the phone business never change, executives said.

"You have to service your customers," Durante said. "You just can't talk about it. Anybody can go out and sell a system. ... but the key is the quality of service you get months or years later."

Paul Durante, Select's chief operating officer and Mike's brother, said that the technological advances such as caller ID and speed dial put powerful tools in the hands of small businesses.

"Let's say that you had a painter five years ago," Paul Durante said. "Maybe when he got home he would call you back. But today because that painter carries a BlackBerry on his hip, he can see exactly who is calling him. He knows if you are one of his better customers. ... It makes it appear like a bigger company."

He added that the needs vary for each client.

"No two companies are the same," he said. "That's why we have to go out and investigate what they need, how they want to do it and how much money they want to spend."

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