

The network system was introduced in June 2007 and supports hardware and software from more than 25 vendors, running on a Cisco backbone. The main patient information system was provided by the Cerner Corporation, while Planet 21 handled the Cisco element.

In Buckley's estimation, the data and voice network has made a significant difference to how the hospital's resources are used. "The end users have access to a lot more features now, which they can choose to use if they want – and most do. For example, there's an up-to-date online directory accessible through each handset that allows staff to find an extension number for an individual without having to ring the main switch for the number," he said.

"This frees up a lot of operator time at the main switch. The system also empowers individuals to set up and maintain their own voice mail and to deal directly with external contacts without having to come through the switch. We've reduced switch traffic enormously and we hope to reduce it further."

According to Buckley, this VoIP system has allowed the main hospital switch to move from putting through calls to become more customer-focused in the service it provides. "There's also potential to further expand this into a call centre to allow the switch to deal with routine queries itself, without having to transfer the call on to specific hospital departments."

At the moment, the system in place at St James's Hospital is accessed using phone handsets and desktop PCs, but there is also a wireless network in place that can be accessed using laptops and tablet PCs.

"There's a lot of potential for expansion. If, in the future, we develop other satellite clinics, we could easily expand our systems to accommodate that. Or if we were to link up with other hospitals, we could take other campuses on board.

"There are no immediate plans for that, but the modularity and expandability of the Cisco system gives us the options we wouldn't otherwise have," said Buckley.

Expandability is one of the factors that makes large scale VoIP installations attractive to major Irish companies. AIB recently decided to put an IP-based telephone system into its Bank Centre in Dublin, and



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according to the team responsible for the project, by March of 2008, this system will handle 5,000 phone extensions, serving 4,500 people on a daily basis.

Paul Williams, a senior AIB executive for the enterprise systems and technology function, said: "We've built a core infrastructure in our two data centres, and the system we've installed has the capability to scale to 20,000 extensions.

"When people talk about using internet technology for making phone calls, it can cause confusion, because unless they've experienced corporate-class installations, they tend to think of things like Skype and other consumer VoIP systems, which can be of very variable quality. While the protocol is the same, the infrastructure is significantly different," he said. "For our staff, there is no difference in call quality between these systems and traditional phone networks."

AIB recently announced that it will open a customer

contact centre next April in the Airside Retail Park in Swords, Dublin, employing around 260 call centre staff. This facility will use the same network infrastructure as the Ballsbridge base, and Williams and his colleagues are currently engaged in building the capability to drive the new Swords location.

One of the benefits driving AIB's adoption of its VoIP system is the ability to 'hot desk'. Using a VoIP system, phone extension numbers can be transferred easily from one desk to another. The extension belongs to the person logged on, not the physical location.

When staff store their files and information on central servers rather than on desktop PCs, the result is a hot desking environment where whoever is present can work from any location in the office.

"Staff can log into their phone and their own 'desktop' from any PC in the organisation, and this allows for lots of flexibility. It allows us to create virtual teams and even virtual call centres, enabling people who are dispersed geographically to work together as a single entity. This allows us to spread our skills base around different locations in a cost-effective manner," said Williams.

This major project, and the first in Ireland, was carried out over eight months by a technical team that combined the expertise of AIB's own IT department and Eircom, with its specialist Lan Communications team. "It was a very positive experience for a complex project and it should be acknowledged our technical partners delivered to the highest standards."

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment has also embraced VoIP as a useful technology. Richard Barry, IT manager for networks and communications in the

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, said: "The driver for our adoption of VoIP was the decentralisation of 100 staff to Carlow last summer.

"It was a green field site and a great opportunity to try out a VoIP installation at a reasonable price. Up to this, it would have been too costly to replace our existing systems when there was no good reason to do so.

"We knew we were going to have to extend our new system at various points in the future, so it was important to put in a system that would be scalable.

"We also wanted to set it up so that we wouldn't have to make huge changes to it when we did want to scale it up. Essentially, a number of separate projects came together to become a unified communications project."

The Carlow facility houses two department of offices that have relocated to Carlow as part of the gov-

ernment's decentralisation initiative. The National Employment Rights Authority and The Companies Registration Office are now partially based here and make use of a call centre, as well as voice mail and call recording capabilities – enabled by the use of IP.

"We've set up two Cisco call manager servers in Dublin in order to provide scalability and resilience for the future. We can and will be adding more locations around the country to the system through these servers, but in the meantime, we have full integration with our own Nortel Meridian systems. This allows us to make calls to Carlow and vice versa using four digit dialling on our own internet network," said Barry.

"We're saving on leased lines using this system, as we didn't need to add any extra lines to Carlow to carry internal voice traffic, because this is all working across our new wide area network."