

Hanging on the telephone

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Conference calling has become an integral part of the legal world. Lawyers routinely schedule calls for everything, from new client consultations to transaction negotiations to arbitration hearings with a judge in attendance.

In fact, a recent study conducted among 142 US lawyers by Harvard Law School found that 92% of respondents considered conference calling to be 'useful', whereas only 85% thought the same of actual in-person meetings.

However, as any regular conference caller will attest, this essential business communications tool comes with some familiar everyday frustrations. The first few minutes can be somewhat chaotic, as the host tries to work out who has joined, who is missing, and how to add people in — not to mention how to mute those participants with disturbing background noise who are dialing in from the airport or the middle of a traffic jam.

A typical conference call has little practical visibility or control. The call host often retreats to a meeting room to benefit from a private, quiet environment and the use of a high-quality speakerphone. However, the phone often depicts little more than the conference access number dialed: it tends to be a 'black-box' experience for the call host.

Most services in the market today offer touch-tone controls, but few users know what they are and fewer still are comfortable using them for fear of making an embarrassing error in front of clients or senior colleagues. Some services offer a web-based control tool, but this necessitates having an internet-connected computer at hand, as well as knowing the URL address and an account username and password. The impracticalities of these types of tools are demonstrated in their low industry adoption rates — typically less than 5% of calls.

But the problems do not stop there. The lack of visibility also presents potentially serious security concerns. How can callers guard against uninvited participants accessing a sensitive call? In a recent study by Survey.com of 148 UK enterprises, more than half of the respondents admitted that they often have no idea who is actually on their conference calls.

Recent advances in conferencing technology, along with the proliferation of BlackBerry smartphones within the legal profession, have made it possible to address these challenges. Through its 'conference controller for BlackBerry' service, Ring2 Conferencing has turned the BlackBerry (or a Windows Mobile device) into an independent remote controller of conference calls, providing enhanced visibility, security and control.

The call host and participants can still dial into the conference from any phone. However, as soon as the first invited participant joins the call, the call host's BlackBerry is alerted and can then be used as a remote controller of the conference call to:

- join as a leader/host from a phone of one's choice;
- see a real-time list of participants as they join or leave the call;
- add a missing participant, or perhaps add the client or judge when others have all assembled;
- mute the participant who has distracting background noise;
- put others on hold with music for a private side conversation with the client; and
- record the call and download it as an MP3 file for transcription.

If, during the course of a call, a participant is dropped off by accident, the call host can see specifically who has dropped and redial that person immediately. Similarly, if a judge or other important participant needs to be brought into the call, the host can bring up the appropriate number on the BlackBerry and bring the person in at the appropriate moment. Furthermore, throughout the call, the host can ensure that nobody is listening in who should not be.

"Security on conference calls is critical given the sensitive nature of many calls," said Mark Grannis, a partner at Harris Wiltshire & Grannis in Washington DC. "With Ring2's service we can always see who is on the call at any given moment so we are sure the calls are secure."

Ring2's service can be deployed seamlessly using a firm's in-house BlackBerry Enterprise Server, such that all necessary account and conference information is automatically populated to users' devices. Due to its mobility and ease of access and use, the remote controller is achieving adoption rates in excess of 60% of calls over touch-tone or web-based alternatives.

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Ring2 Conferencing services are distributed by Alabama Data, Inc.
Contact Neal Hutchinson for a free demonstration at 1-800-230-7176