

BUYING GUIDE · QUOTES · 2026

Four Quotes, All Called a PBX. Now What?

You asked three or four suppliers for a phone system and the quotes came back using the same words for very different things. One is a box in your comms room. One is a private instance in a data centre.

PBX means private branch exchange, the switch that lets your internal extensions ring each other and share a smaller number of outside paths. Every business phone system contains one. What differs between quotes is where it runs and who is responsible for it. Five architectures share the name: hardware in your comms room; hardware in your comms room switching over your data network; a private instance in a provider's data centre; a shared cloud platform; and a broader unified communications or contact centre platform that includes calling.

The short version

What it is	How to recognise it in a quote	What it means for you
1. On-premises hardware, a system in your comms room, wired to physical lines.	A hardware line item, an installation charge, and a maintenance or support contract. Possibly "line rental".	You own an asset and its risks. Parts, technicians and the line types it depends on are all getting scarcer.
2. On-premises, switching over your data network, a server or appliance on site, calls carried over your existing cabling, external calls over SIP.	A server or appliance, per-extension licences, SIP channel charges, and often an annual software maintenance figure.	Lower hardware cost, same ownership. You patch it, you secure it, and fraudulent international traffic through it is generally your bill.
3. A private instance, hosted, the same software, run for you in a provider's data centre.	No on-site equipment beyond handsets, but per-extension pricing and language about "your instance" or "your tenant".	Hardware becomes somebody else's problem. Configuration is still yours, and so is the internet at each of your sites.
4. A shared cloud platform, one large system serving many businesses, each isolated.	Per-user pricing, self-service administration, minutes-not-days provisioning, no instance language.	Nothing to maintain, upgrades happen underneath you, adding a person takes minutes. Deep customisation is not on offer, configuration is.
5. A platform that includes calling, unified communications, or a contact centre platform.	Priced per user in tiers, with messaging, meetings, queues, reporting and integrations listed alongside calling.	You are buying more than a phone system. Right if you need queues and reporting; over-specified if you need eight handsets and a receptionist.

■ Also worth knowing

Unit	The question that matters	How badly it can distort a comparison
Per extension	Does one person with a desk phone, a laptop app and a mobile app count as one extension or three?	Severely. This one question can double or triple a quote for exactly the same twenty-two people.
Per user	What counts as a user? A warehouse phone, a lobby handset, a meeting-room phone and a gate intercom are endpoints, not people.	Moderately, and it usually favours per-user pricing once you list your shared devices honestly.
Per concurrent call	How many simultaneous calls, based on what evidence? Sized from real data or from headcount?	Both ways. Under-size it and callers get engaged tone at 9am; over-size it and you pay for a peak you have never had.
Per number and per minute	Are direct numbers, 1300/1800 numbers and call charges included, capped or per minute?	Severely for anyone with a 1300 number, where inbound cost depends on where the caller is calling from.
Capital plus maintenance	What is the refresh cycle, and does the comparison period include a replacement?	Severely. A five-year comparison with a replacement due in year six makes owning hardware look far better than it is.

The one-question test

"When this is finished and installed, what equipment will be on my premises?" If the honest answer is handsets and possibly a router, you are looking at 3, 4 or 5. Anything else and you are buying an asset. It is the fastest way to sort four quotes into two piles, and it takes one email.

■ Questions the full guide answers

- ☐ What does PBX mean on a phone system quote?
- ☐ How do I compare phone system quotes that are priced differently?
- ☐ Is one person with a desk phone, a mobile app and a laptop app charged three times?
- ☐ What happens to my phones if the internet goes down?
- ☐ What costs usually appear after signing a phone system contract?
- ☐ Will my phone numbers still be mine if I change providers later?

This is the summary. The guide has the detail.

Every point above is worked through in full on our site, with the Australian context, the numbers and the exceptions. If you would rather talk it through, call **1300 663 222** or visit vocphone.com/about/contact-us.