New call center needed tremendous flexibility and easy integration along with remarkable value.

Leon Business Solutions (LBS), launched their consumer finance and credit-issuing portfolio and quickly realized their new start-up call center needed an outbound VoIP solution to replace their traditional landline service. The new solution needed to be inexpensive yet expandable to accommodate the rapid growth of the call center. It also needed to be capable of converting analog and digital systems into feature-rich VoIP telecommunications that would manage collections, as well as integrate into the backbone of their central operations in order to generate automatic calls for each customer account.
After researching several big box options that did not fit into their start-up operational budget, Asterisk, sponsored by Digium, proved why it is the most widely used do-it-yourself telephony platform in the world. Asterisk is a free, open source telecommunications framework used internationally by telecom technicians, in-house IT, and communications managers to build affordable telephone solutions for businesses and organizations of all sizes. By transforming an ordinary computer into a communications server, Asterisk powers IP PBX systems, VoIP gateways, and conference servers.

LBS, based out of the capital city of Harare, in eastern Africa, has 70 employees with additional locations in Gweru, Bulawayo, and Bindura—all in Zimbabwe. It had become too difficult to interface the conference center phones with the traditional phone system; and adding new lines was a long, cumbersome process with the service provider. According to Edmore Veremu, head of LBS technology, the company uses open source technology to power basic operations, but their Call Center Project committee wanted to begin their research by looking first at big box telecommunication solutions.

“We got quotes on a variety of VoIP systems, including an Avaya, but they were all too expensive and the implementation would be too costly,” Veremu explains. “As a technician who has always liked using open source for customizing operations, I started looking for an open source solution I knew would be both a viable and more affordable alternative.”

Veremu admits he was not familiar with Asterisk when he started his search, but upon reading about it, knew he could build what they needed. Once the final decision was made, he says their biggest challenge with the implementation and the familiarization of Asterisk was the time it required.

“There was a learning curve involved with Asterisk, but the amount of money we saved more than made up for it,” he says. “We saved more than $100,000 by not buying an off-the-shelf solution, including thousands in annual licensing fees and on infrastructure changes required in building a VoIP network from our base systems. Also, in terms of monthly costs, our calling costs declined from 0.15 per minute to 0.9 per minute.”

LBS first installed a designated server configured with Asterisk at their headquarters in Harare, adding a back-up server for redundancy so that they don’t lose phone service in the event of a catastrophic system failure.

They then created a Virtual Private Network (VPN) with a fiber link between LBS and their service provider; and interfaced that with their core operating system, eXcom, using call files. From there, they integrated with their call center retail payment and processing platform and their 3CX client.
Finally, they set up 25 extensions with new HD headsets and two telecommunications trunks, a method for providing network access to multiple clients by sharing a set of lines instead of providing them individually.

“We now have Automatic Calling and Call Recording, which we did not have before,” says Veremu. “There were also a couple of surprises we hadn’t thought about until the Asterisk system was in place, like video and Short Message Service (SMS).”

Furthermore, the new Asterisk-based telecom system eliminates prior problems. “We no longer have disputes with customers who deny their payment commitments, now that LBS has recordings of those conversations; we no longer have problems dialing and redialing because Asterisk does all that for us. And most importantly, there was a smooth integration of our core operational system with Asterisk calling capabilities, which is exactly what we needed!”