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NEW INDUSTRY COALITION SEEKS FORWARD-THINKING POLICIES FOR INTERNET-ENABLED VOICE COMMUNICATIONS

Group Warns That Regulatory Mistakes Could Stifle Technology Benefits

Brussels, Belgium – Leading companies on the cutting edge of developing and delivering Internet voice communications technologies, today launched a new coalition to advance policies that enable consumers and businesses throughout Europe to enjoy the full promise and potential of Internet communications. This new coalition of companies, from Europe and around the globe, believes that with the right public policies, Internet-enabled communications, such as Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), can increase competition, provide a platform for innovation, drive broadband deployment, and enable economic growth.

The recent release of formal Proposals by the European Commission to amend the existing regulatory framework for communications marks the start of a wide ranging review by the Council of Ministers and European Parliament. As we enter this era of rapid and potentially far reaching regulatory change, industry leaders have come together under one roof to create an authoritative voice for the Internet-enabled communications industry. The Voice on the Net (VON) Coalition Europe, made up of leading Internet communications and technology companies from Europe and around the world, will advocate for Internet voice innovation and the policy framework that enables it. The coalition will work to educate, inform and promote responsible government policies that enable innovation and the many benefits that Internet voice innovations can deliver.

Founding members of the VON Coalition Europe include such industry leaders as: iBasis, Intel, Google, Microsoft, Rebtel, Skype, and Voxxbone.

"Internet-enabled communications are an entirely new genre of communications products, services, and applications and a new frontier in communications for individuals and businesses alike. In order to unleash their vast benefits, policymakers need to embrace forward-thinking policy approaches," said Stephen Collins of Skype. "If we automatically subject this new technology to legacy telephone regulation, consumers and business users could miss out on the new services, increased choices, better prices and improved features that VoIP for example, can deliver," said Collins.

"To maximize the consumer benefit from VoIP and other exciting IP-enabled technologies, policymakers should embrace a light-handed regulatory approach that facilitates competition, innovation, and rapid deployment of IP networks," said Peter Pitsch, Executive Director, Communications Policy, at Intel.

The group recognizes that there are important social policy obligations like emergency access that have yet to be fulfilled by some types of VoIP services, such as those that substitute for the traditional telephone in your home. The coalition hopes to educate policymakers about the vast progress that has been made, and the potential for Internet-enabled communications to further extend the reach and capabilities in an emergency. However, the Coalition is concerned, for example, that premature application of 112 rules to web sites, click-to-dial services, 1-way PSTN-out interconnected voice services, and other VoIP services that are not a replacement for traditional home/business phone services could actually harm public safety, stifle innovations critical to people with disabilities, stall competition, and limit access to innovative and evolving communication options where there is no expectation of placing a 112 call.

With VoIP, voice is now becoming just another application riding on the Internet or on data networks – and is being integrated into web sites, social networking communities, instant messaging software, blogs, mapping programs, voice recognition applications, and is likely to be used tomorrow in ways we can't even imagine today.

“VoIP and other Internet-enabled communications technologies are transformative technologies,” said Kevin Minsky, Policy Counsel, at Microsoft. “Enlightened policy approaches will enable VoIP and other Internet-enabled devices, applications, and services to transform communications, boost business productivity, and empower consumers with more choices and capabilities never before possible.”

While promoting positive policy outcomes, the coalition said it will also work to resist the creation of regulatory barriers that could prevent consumers from enjoying the vast benefits and innovations that VoIP and Internet-enabled communications have only begun to deliver. Hjalmar Winbladh, Rebtel co-founder and CEO said, “Reflexively applying legacy telephone regulations to new, innovative Internet communication services, applications, and devices presents the greatest potential roadblock for extending the benefits of these new and exciting technologies to more consumers.”

Outreach Planned to European Policymakers

Regulatory changes are afoot that could fundamentally reshape the European communications landscape. By launching a new European focused effort, the coalition hopes to educate policymakers throughout Europe about forward thinking policy approaches that can enable families and friends to communicate in ways never before possible, integrate voice into a variety of new web based applications, and boost business productivity by as much as 15%.¹

Rodrigue Ullens de Schooten, CEO Voxbone, said “the Coalition will help educate, inform and promote forward-thinking policies that do not stifle innovations with heavy handed regulation that could potentially delay the vast benefits that VoIP can deliver.”

“We are going to engage in direct outreach to policymakers throughout Europe; work with public safety and standards bodies on advancing new policy solutions; and participate in proceedings and debates throughout the EU,” Erik De Herdt, General Counsel Voxbone, noted.

The European Commission’s proposed framework revisions signal the start of a critical phase that could determine how and when consumers benefit from the lower prices, new services, and advanced communication features that VoIP and other Internet-enabled communications can deliver. Such EC policies, if properly implemented, have the potential to unleash these services in Europe and position member countries to take a leading role of deployment of such services to consumers and businesses. To help work toward this goal, the VoIP, Internet, and information technology communities must speak with a unified voice, behind a common set of principles, and work with the EC and member states to make sure that unfounded concerns do not prevent consumers and businesses from enjoying the benefits of innovative Internet voice applications, services, and devices.

Similarly forward thinking Internet-based communication providers interested in joining the VON Coalition Europe should e-mail stephen.collins@skype.net.

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¹ Avaya estimates businesses can achieve an estimated 15% increase in personal productivity through smarter communications technologies like VoIP.