May 21, 2013

Google Voice – A Proposal for Change, by Alan R. Castro

With over ten million installs and an average rating of four stars out of five on the Android market, it is hard to argue that the Google Voice app is not successful as it is. It provides quick and convenient access to the Google Voice service straight from users' mobile devices. However, there are several features that, if implemented, would improve the app and benefit the users as well as the Google name. These additions include full Wi-Fi calling support, full MMS support, in-app voicemail greeting recordings, and inbox item groupings.

Wi-Fi Calling is one of the main reasons users sign up for the Google Voice service to begin with; it unchains them from their mobile carriers. This is a feature that is available to Desktop users, but is inexplicably missing from the Android app. Through the Google Voice app, users can make calls with their Google Voice number on their Android devices, but at the cost of their carrier's mobile minutes. As stated on the description of the app in the Google Play Store, "When using Google Voice for Android, both domestic and international calls are placed through a US-based Google Voice access number, and will use the standard minutes from your cell phone plan." This is absurd. One of the prime motivations behind using the Google Voice service for placing calls is to avoid carrier fees. If the feature is available on the Desktop, why exclude it from Android users? People want to make Wi-Fi calls on the go using their smartphones, not their clunky desktop computers, and Android phones are perfect for that function, with Wi-Fi and microphone access conveniently in one device. With the mobile industry booming, smartphones are even starting to become more powerful than desktop computers, so surely the decision to leave out Wi-Fi calling from the Android app was not founded on hardware limitations.

Google may have excluded Wi-Fi calling in fear of infringing upon mobile carriers and disrupting the mobile industry. Wi-Fi calls use the internet's existing infrastructure instead of the more expensive telecommunication networks and are therefore much cheaper than over-the-air calls. The mobile industry is aware that allowing internet calls would negatively impact their revenue; however, Google should not hold itself back just because carriers feel threatened. Voice over IP is a powerful, cheap, and much needed technology. If computer hardware costs decrease as better technologies emerge, why can't the same hold true for mobile communications? Mobile carriers refuse to adopt the promising technology of Voice over IP calls because it will not benefit them financially. The prevalent question is: why does Google side with them? In order to provide its users with a more extensive service and reinforce its image as a leader in emerging technologies, Google should reconsider its negotiations with mobile carriers and expand Vo-IP technology, rather than hindering it in order to keep mobile providers satisfied. Whatever happened to Google's corporate motto, "Don't be evil"?

The lack of a Wi-Fi calling feature on the Google Voice app puts users in an awkward situation: those who truly want internet calls are forced to download third-party apps that provide this function on top of the Google Voice app; however, this approach gives third parties access to consumers' Google accounts and puts them at risk. Others may decide to eschew the Google Voice service altogether, since their main use for it is not supported on Android devices. In short, Wi-Fi calling is a feature that many users expect of the Google Voice app; by excluding it from the Android app, Google fails to provide and meet the users' expectations.

Another missing feature from the Google Voice app is MMS support, or picture messaging. This is the most-requested feature on Google Voice and the reason for many low-star ratings on the Play Store. Google Voice is advertised as only needing "one phone number" to hand out to contacts, but a problem arises when that phone number cannot accept picture messages. Those who want to have the ability of sending and receiving images must hand out two numbers: their Google Voice number to receive calls/texts, and their mobile carrier number to receive picture messages. Contacts of the user then have to keep track and remember to send the user picture messages to a *different* number. It becomes difficult to manage, defeating the "one phone number" purpose of Google Voice. This is a large hole in the intended goal of the service that must be remedied as soon as possible. Other similar services, such as "TextNow," offer the ability to receive picture messages through internet data, so it is difficult to imagine why Google is unable to provide the same functionality. Like Wi-Fi calling, this is an essential feature that users expect.

Another absent function is the ability to record and upload voicemail greetings within the Google Voice app. Currently, voicemail greetings can only be set by calling a user's own Google Voice number, navigating a long series of spoken menu options, and recording the new greeting in-call. This is annoying for those who already have the perfect greeting saved on a sound file on their computer (or Android device) and simply wish to upload it without placing a call and attempting to recreate the message. Furthermore, by limiting users to placing calls in order to change their greetings, Google forces them to spend their mobile minutes, which is both costly and frustrating. I propose to allow users to upload existing sound files for greetings, or to at least allow them to record their greetings through the app over Wi-Fi, rather than relying on a cell phone signal. Allowing users to customize their voicemail greeting in-app instead of in-call would solve the problems above and provide a more intuitive experience for users.

The last proposal is the ability to group items in the inbox by sender. Currently, each missed call in the inbox is listed as a separate item, along with each voicemail or text conversation. This design flaw leads to redundant list items that contribute to a congested inbox. As the premier developer in the Android world, Google sets the basic guidelines that serve as standards for other developers to follow; Google apps, then, must evoke a sense of practicability and functionality that other applications must strive to match. The Google Voice app, however, sticks out amongst its better designed siblings, such as the Android dialer and the Gmail app, both of which group interactions (missed calls and emails) by sender, a much more convenient approach. The adoption of this method into the Google Voice app would provide a more organized view for the user, uncluttering the inbox and following the same intuitive layout as these existing apps. Grouping items in the inbox by sender would allow easier managing of Google Voice messages and provide a more natural and consistent experience to Android users.

The Google Voice Android app is a very useful way for Android users to manage their Google Voice account on the go, but there are still very necessary features that users expect from Google, including Wi-Fi calling and MMS support. Users have been expecting these features from the very first release and it is disappointing that they have yet to be implemented. Other features that would benefit the app are the ability to set voicemail greetings, and the ability to group inbox items by sender. These changes would provide a more intuitive experience for users and would uphold Google's top position in the Android market.