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Converting voice mail to text messages

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Real estate mogul Scott Rechler's phone often starts ringing by 5:30 a.m., so it doesn't take long for messages to pile up.

Instead of slogging through his in box by listening to his voice mail, he reads messages through a service that automatically transcribes them into text.

"I always found it to be a burden to find the time to wade through a whole voice mail process," said Rechler, chief executive and chairman of RexCorp Realty, based in Uniondale. With the transcription service, he said, "You can skim quickly," and call the person back, forward the message or put it on a to-do list.

Managing voice mail -- originally intended to save time and increase productivity -- has become its own time-consuming chore. Services such as [Manhattan](#)-based PhoneTag, to which Rechler has subscribed for more than a year, claim to save users time by turning voice mail into text.

PhoneTag sends converted messages to a cell phone, BlackBerry or e-mail account. Voice-mail messages can still be stored. The cost is \$9.95 a month for up to 40 messages or \$29.95 a month for unlimited messages. PhoneTag, previously named SimulScribe, was founded in 2003.

Other companies with voice mail-to-text services include SpinVox, based in Britain; GotVoice, with headquarters in Kirkland, Wash.; CallWave, based in [Santa Barbara](#), Calif.; and YouMail, based in Aliso Viejo, Calif. Vonage, the Internet phone company based in Holmdel, N.J., also offers it.

Analyst Roger L. Kay, of Endpoint Technologies Associates, said voice-to-text technology has improved enough that voice-mail messages, especially crucial phone numbers, can be accurately transcribed. "We don't need every single word to be perfect -- it's not like it's going to be printed by [Random House](#)," he said. "In that case, it's pretty useful."

SpinVox subscriber Ben Friedland, 32, a senior vice president at CB Richard Ellis in Manhattan, said that he usually can avoid having to listen to the message. "Most of the time," he said, "you can piece it together."

Meanwhile, so-called visual voice mail lets users have more control over which messages to listen to.

On Apple's iPhone, a user can see at a glance a list of who has left messages and can hear them in any order without listening to instructions.

Wireless-industry analyst Mark Lowenstein of Mobile Ecosystem said cell phone users younger than 25 favor text messages, instant messaging and social networking sites and consider voice mail an "antiquated service. Even e-mail seems sort of last-generation."

"Voice mail has been due for a refresh," he said.

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