

If you worked in tech or telecom around 1990, the landscape looked almost unrecognizable compared with today. Modems squealed, long-distance calls were still expensive, and the word "smartphone" did not exist. The giants were IBM, AT&T, and the regional Bell companies. Apple was struggling. Microsoft was just emerging as a dominant force. Google, Amazon, and Facebook were not even on the whiteboards yet.

Looking back at that world is more than nostalgia. It explains why landlines are fading, why Verizon and AT&T still dominate mobile service, how we got from ARPANET to the modern internet, and why the phone in your pocket has more power than an entire 1990s data center.



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This is a tour through the major tech and phone companies of 1990, what they did then, and what has become of them now, with some practical side trips into landline options, dial-up memories, operating systems, and business phone systems along the way.

1990: When "The Phone Company" Still Meant Copper Wires

In North America, if you asked "What was the old phone company called?" Most people would still say "Ma Bell." They were talking about the Bell System, the AT&T-controlled monopoly that ran most of the United States telephone network for most of the 20th century.

By 1990 the Bell System had already been broken apart. A 1984 antitrust settlement split AT&T into:

- AT&T (long-distance, equipment, some R&D)
- Seven Regional Bell Operating Companies, often called the "Baby Bells"

Those Baby Bells handled local phone service on the old copper network. This is what people mean when they ask "What were the telephone companies in the 1980s?" Or "What was the name of the telephone company in the 80s?" In practice, depending on where you lived, your bill came from one of those regional companies. It still felt like a single, unavoidable utility.

Outside the United States, the picture was similar. Most countries had one big state-run or semi-privatized telephone company. British Telecom in the UK, NTT in Japan, Deutsche Bundespost Telekom in West Germany. Competition was barely a concept.

The Biggest Tech and Phone Companies in 1990

Telecom and computing were intertwined, but the big names were different from today. If you look at "What were the biggest tech companies in 1990?" You mostly see hardware and network players, not internet platforms.

Here is a simplified snapshot of some of the most important US and global tech and phone companies around 1990 and the role they played:

- AT&T: Long-distance, network backbone, and equipment, descended from Bell System
- The Baby Bells (Bell Atlantic, NYNEX, Ameritech, BellSouth, Pacific Telesis, Southwestern Bell, US West): Local phone service and early business phone systems
- IBM: Mainframes, minicomputers, and the PC standard that defined corporate IT
- DEC (Digital Equipment Corporation), HP, and other minicomputer vendors: Department-level computing before PCs took over
- Motorola, Nokia, Ericsson, NEC: Early mobile phone and network equipment manufacturers

Those names largely defined "all the major phone companies" from a consumer perspective. When people ask "What are the big 5 phone companies?" Or "What are the major telecommunications companies?" In the 1990 context, they usually mean AT&T plus the Baby Bells in North America, and the major national incumbents like BT and NTT globally.

On the computing side, Microsoft and Apple were visible but not yet dominant in the way big tech operates now. If you fast-forward and ask "What are the 7 big tech companies" today, people usually list Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet (Google), Amazon, Meta, Tesla, and Nvidia. Only two of those were meaningful commercial players in 1990, and both were still small compared with IBM and AT&T.

Where Did the Baby Bells Go?

One of the more confusing parts of telecom history is how the seven Baby Bells morphed into the big mobile carriers we know now. It also explains why, if you ask "Which companies still offer a landline?" The answer usually starts with the same few names.

Through the 1990s and 2000s, the Baby Bells merged, acquired, and rebranded. The details are messy, but the end result is simpler.

Bell Atlantic merged with NYNEX, then acquired GTE, and rebranded as Verizon in 2000. Southwestern Bell renamed itself SBC, then acquired Ameritech and Pacific Telesis, and in 2005 bought the now-shrunken AT&T and adopted the AT&T name. US West was bought by Qwest, which was later absorbed into CenturyLink, now called Lumen.

So if you pull on the thread of "What companies still offer landline service?" In much of the United States, you get:

Verizon for traditional landlines and fiber-based digital voice in its footprint.

AT&T for landlines and VoIP where it still maintains copper or fiber. Lumen (CenturyLink and related brands) in many western and rural areas. A mix of regional independents, electric cooperatives, and cable companies offering digital phone service.

There are also competitive local exchange carriers (CLECs) and over-the-top VoIP providers, but the underlying copper network usually traces back to those legacy telcos.

A related question that comes up often is "What year will landlines be phased out?" Or "Will I lose my landline in 2027?" There is no single global cut-off date. Instead, regulators in many countries are allowing carriers to retire copper on a region-by-region basis once there are alternatives like fiber or fixed wireless. In the UK, for example, the old PSTN is scheduled to be shut down and fully migrated to IP voice around the middle of this decade. In the United States, the Federal Communications Commission has allowed carriers to stop offering traditional POTS lines in some areas, but there is no official hard end date. In practice, rural copper will likely linger longest, but it will become more expensive and less supported over time.

The Vanishing Dial Tone: Landlines, Seniors, and Costs

For many households, especially older adults, a physical phone on the wall or a simple cordless handset still feels safer and more comfortable. That is why questions like "Which is the best landline phone provider for seniors?" Or "Can I just have a landline without internet?" Keep surfacing even as mobile adoption reaches nearly everyone.

There are three broad categories of home phone service now:

Traditional POTS landline over copper. This is the service that still works during many power outages because the line is powered from the central office. It is also the one carriers increasingly want to retire. It tends to be the most expensive, and often carries fees and taxes that surprise people. When someone asks "Who is the cheapest landline provider?" And truly means old-fashioned copper voice, the honest answer is "whichever incumbent carrier serves your area, but it likely will not be cheap."

Digital or VoIP home phone through your cable or fiber company. Think of Xfinity Voice, Spectrum Voice, or AT&T Digital Phone. The line plugs into your router or a small box, not directly into the old demarcation block. These lines usually go out when your power or broadband does, unless you have a battery backup.

Independent VoIP services that run over any internet connection, such as Ooma, Vonage, magicJack, or small business-oriented hosted PBX providers. They can be both flexible and inexpensive, but they depend entirely on your broadband quality.

When people ask "What is the cheapest landline phone service without internet?" They usually imagine the first category, but most of the true budget options now live in the third category and operate over broadband whether you see it or not.

For seniors, the trade-offs are specific. The best landline service for senior citizens often means:

Simple billing without forced bundles.

Strong 911 support with accurate address information. Reliable power backup. Basic calling features like voicemail, caller ID, and *69 (automatic call return).

Many carriers quietly market senior plans, but they can be hard to find on the main website. AT&T, for instance, has historically offered discounted landline and wireless plans for qualifying low-income or senior customers, but pricing varies by state and regulatory program. When someone asks "How much is an AT&T landline per month

for seniors?" The only honest answer is that it can range from roughly 25 to 60 USD or more depending on location, taxes, and features, and you have to call and ask specifically about senior or lifeline programs.

If the goal is the simplest handset rather than the service, basic corded phones with large buttons and loud ringers are still available from Panasonic, VTech, AT&T-branded hardware and specialty brands that focus on hearing-impaired users. Those often answer both "What is the simplest landline phone for seniors?" And "What is the easiest phone for an elderly person?" Better than a smartphone does.

A practical worry is whether landlines still work without internet. Traditional copper POTS lines do. Digital and VoIP lines do not. If you have a modem or router in the middle, you are on a system that relies on broadband and electricity in your home.

One related detail that tends to confuse people involves star codes. Some of the more common ones on landlines are:

*69: Call Phone Systems Company California mtinc.net return, dials the last incoming number if supported.

*82: Unblocks your caller ID on a per-call basis if you normally hide it. *77: Turns on anonymous call rejection on some carriers, blocking calls that hide caller ID.

These codes can vary by provider, especially as voice moves to IP, so they are best treated as approximate behavior and confirmed with your carrier.

From ARPANET to Dial-Up: Before AOL Dominated the Login Screen

When people ask "What was the internet called in 1973?" The historically accurate answer is ARPANET. It was a research network funded by the US Department of Defense, connecting universities and labs. It ran protocols that eventually evolved into the modern internet, but no ordinary consumer had an ARPANET account. It was not a service you ordered.

Before the web, before AOL disks piled up in the mail, there was a small ecosystem of commercial online services. If you remember dialing long-distance to check your email, you probably used one of these old dial-up internet companies:

CompuServe, one of the earliest and most robust services, with forums, email, and file libraries.

Prodigy, known for a more graphical interface and flat-rate pricing at a time when hourly charges were common. GENie, General Electric's online service, somewhat more technical and hobbyist-oriented. Various local bulletin board systems, which you reached by dialing a local phone number with a modem, sometimes daisy-chained together through FidoNet.

AOL arrived into this world, not out of nowhere. So when someone asks "What came before AOL?" They are really asking about that mix of CompuServe, Prodigy, GENie, and thousands of BBSs that offered chat, file exchange, and email long before the phrase "social media" existed.

By the mid-1990s, "What were the internet providers in the 90s?" Had a broader answer. In addition to the big national names like AOL and EarthLink, most regions had several independent ISPs offering PPP dial-up access on standard internet protocols, not the walled gardens of earlier services. These ISPs operated out of small offices with racks of modems, PRI lines, and a handful of routers. The sound of a bank of modems all connecting and disconnecting at once is something you never forget.

The first website in the sense we use the term today launched in 1991 at CERN, created by Tim Berners-Lee. It described the World Wide Web project itself. The URL was info.cern.ch, and mirrored versions of the original page

still exist. So if you are wondering "What was the first website ever?" That is the one historians point to.

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The internet also grew alongside a darker side. Even in the dial-up days, you had harassment on chat systems, malware distributed via pirated software, early forms of phishing, and underground forums trading illegal content. Asking "What is the dark side of the internet?" is less a question about a single place, and more about a pattern. Wherever communication is cheap and semi-anonymous, you find scams, privacy invasion, and exploitation. The tools have changed, but the pattern is old.

Mobile Phones in 1990: Before Smartphones and App Stores

In 1990, mobile phones were heavy, expensive, and rare. Car phones bolted to the center console still signaled status. If you want to talk about "the top 20 phone brands" globally in that era, you are mostly listing network equipment makers and early handset manufacturers.

Motorola made the iconic brick phones and had a strong presence in network gear.

Nokia, still making rubber boots and television sets a couple of decades earlier, had pivoted hard into telecom and was on its way to dominating mobile phones in the 1990s and early 2000s. Ericsson, NEC, and Siemens played major roles, especially in Europe and parts of Asia. In the United States, some handsets carried the branding of carriers or resellers, but the underlying hardware almost always came from those few companies.

There were no "top 10 most popular phones" in the modern sense, because the numbers were tiny and the segmentation crude. You basically had transportable units, car phones, and a few handhelds, all focused on voice.

Today, if someone asks "What are the top 20 phone brands?" The list includes Apple, Samsung, Xiaomi, Oppo, Vivo, Huawei, Motorola, OnePlus, Realme, Tecno, and others, many of them little known in North America but

huge in India, Africa, and Latin America. The center of gravity moved from network-centric European players to global consumer electronics firms, many based in East Asia and China.

A modern question that never came up in 1990 is "Which phone is least likely to be hacked?" Or "What phone do most billionaires use?" Security and status now matter at a completely different level. Reality is messy:

iPhones have a strong reputation for security and consistent updates, which is why many executives and political leaders use them, but they are high-value targets and have been compromised by sophisticated spyware.

Google Pixel phones receive timely security fixes and support more hardened custom operating systems like GrapheneOS, which some security professionals favor, but that is a niche choice. Simple "dumbphones" with no apps present a much smaller attack surface, but they are far less convenient.

There is no single device that is magically "unhackable." The safest platform tends to be one that is updated frequently, used carefully, and has fewer unnecessary apps installed. Many high-net-worth individuals reportedly carry both an iPhone and an Android phone, or keep a separate device for sensitive communication, but details are rarely public enough to answer "What phone do most billionaires use?" Or "What phone does Elon Musk use?" With certainty. Public photographs and interviews often show an iPhone in their hands, but that is observation, not an official spec sheet.

The same caution applies when speculating about politicians. Various reports have mentioned different devices for Donald Trump over the years, including older Android phones and managed iPhones, but because much of that information is secondhand and sometimes outdated, it is safer to say that modern heads of state and senior officials typically use mobile devices that are heavily controlled and monitored by security agencies, regardless of brand.

From IBM and DEC to Apple and Google: The Shift in Top Tech

On the computing side, IBM was the king of 1990. DEC, HP, and other minicomputer vendors filled out the picture. Microsoft was gaining power through MS-DOS and early versions of Windows, but it was not yet seen as one of "the big 7 tech companies." Apple, meanwhile, was in a slump that would not reverse until the late 1990s.

Thirty years later, if someone asks "Who is the number 1 phone company?" Or "What is the top 1 phone in the world?" You are usually considering two axes: devices and services.

For smartphones, in most recent years:

Samsung and Apple trade the global top spot by unit volume, with Xiaomi often in third.



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The most popular single model worldwide is often an iPhone variant or a mid-range Samsung, depending on how you slice the data.

That leads to common questions like "What are the top 3 best phone brands?" Samsung, Apple, and Xiaomi typically lead volume charts, though brand loyalty and perceived quality skew toward Apple and Samsung in many regions.

If you broaden to telecom service providers and ask "What are the top 3 phone service providers?" In the United States, the answer is:

Verizon, historically the largest by revenue and postpaid subscribers.

AT&T, close behind, with extensive business and consumer operations. T-Mobile, which grew dramatically after acquiring Sprint and aggressively marketing unlimited plans.

If you are looking for "the alternative to Verizon," the realistic choices are AT&T or T-Mobile for full-network coverage, and a variety of mobile virtual network operators (MVNOs) like Visible, Mint Mobile, or Google Fi for lower-cost plans that ride on those three networks.

Globally, the major telecommunications companies by subscribers include China Mobile, China Telecom, China Unicom, Vodafone, Bharti Airtel, and others, but those numbers are driven heavily by population size and multi-SIM users.

On the software side, when people ask "Which is the most popular smartphone operating system?" The answer is Android, by a large margin of global market share, especially outside North America and parts of Western Europe. iOS commands a smaller but extremely profitable slice, particularly among higher-income users.

If you step back and ask "What are the 5 mobile operating systems?" That have mattered during the smartphone era, you probably list Android, iOS, and then a rotating cast of former contenders like Symbian, BlackBerry OS, and Windows Phone. In some regions, Huawei's HarmonyOS and lightweight platforms like KaiOS (for feature phones) now matter.

More broadly, "What are the 5 operating systems?" In computing usually means Windows, macOS, Linux, Android, and iOS, with ChromeOS occupying a growing but still smaller niche. Ranking "the top 10 most popular operating systems" depends on whether you count phones, tablets, and PCs together or separately.

Business Phone Systems: From Key Systems to Cloud PBX

In 1990, a "business phone system" meant a physical PBX or key system box in a closet, with punch-down blocks, extension cards, and a relationship with a local telecom dealer you called when something broke. The big vendors were Nortel, AT&T/Lucent, Siemens, and a cluster of regional brands.

Lines came in from the phone company over analog trunks or digital T1/PRI circuits. Features like call transfer, hunt groups, and voicemail required careful programming and sometimes expensive feature licenses.

Today, when people ask "What is a business phone system?" They usually mean something completely different: a cloud-hosted VoIP service with apps on laptops and smartphones, integrated into CRM and help desk tools, and billed per user per month. Physical handsets, if any, are just thin clients.

Some of the widely recognized providers include RingCentral, Zoom Phone, 8x8, and Microsoft Teams Phone. Asking "What is the best business phone system?" Is a bit like asking for the best car. For a small office that wants something close to a traditional phone feel, a simple hosted PBX with a few desk phones may be ideal. For a software company that lives in Microsoft 365, enabling Teams Phone might make more sense.

One interesting side effect of this shift is that many "phone companies" no longer exist in the form they once did. Names like Nortel, WorldCom, and MCI have either gone bankrupt, merged, or been absorbed. So when you ask "What phone companies no longer exist?" Or "What phone companies are out of business?" You are really tracing the end of an era in which telephony was hardware-centric and nationally bounded.

The Survivors: Landlines, Legacy Brands, and What Comes Next

It is easy to treat landlines as a relic, but they are not gone yet. When someone asks "Which companies still offer a landline?" You can still point to the main incumbents, cable firms, and a few specialized providers.

For someone trying to decide between options now, ***Phone Systems Company California*** especially for an older relative who wants a simple, reliable line, it helps to summarize the real-world choices and trade-offs:

1. Traditional copper landline from the incumbent telco: Most reliable during power outages, but often the most expensive and increasingly unavailable in new builds or remote areas.
2. Digital voice over fiber or cable from your broadband provider: Often good value in a bundle, with decent features, but goes down if your internet or power fails unless you add a battery backup.
3. Independent VoIP service: Can be the cheapest landline-like experience, flexible, and portable, but you are entirely dependent on your own broadband and router stability.
4. Wireless "home phone" devices using mobile networks: Some carriers offer a base station that uses cellular service but lets you plug in traditional phones. This can be a good compromise where copper is failing.
5. Simply using a mobile phone with a large-button handset or senior-focused plan: For many, this ends up being the real answer, even though it is no longer a "landline" in the traditional sense.

The question "What is the oldest phone company in America?" Usually points back to the original Bell Telephone Company, founded in 1877 and eventually rolled into AT&T. Through divestitures and rebrandings, that lineage now runs through modern AT&T and some of the former Baby Bells, even if the names and logos have changed.

Behind the consumer story lies a deeper trend. Telephony has collapsed into software. Where once you had separate companies for local service, long-distance, PBXs, and voicemail systems, now a single cloud provider can handle all of that over IP. Old star codes like *69, *77, or *82 are fading into the background. Phone numbers themselves are becoming just another identifier in a contact record.

Yet, for all that change, a few constants remain. People still ask which carrier has the best coverage, who is the number 1 phone company, which smartphone brand to trust, and how to protect themselves from the darker side of online life. The specific names have changed since 1990, but the underlying questions are remarkably familiar: reliability, cost, simplicity, and control.

Understanding where the big tech and phone companies came from around 1990 makes it easier to see where we are heading next. The same forces that broke apart Ma Bell, humbled IBM, and turned dial-up ISPs into footnotes are now at work in mobile, cloud, and platforms. Some of today's giants will look just as quaint in thirty years as a beige desktop PC with a 2400-baud modem does today.