



BAHRAIN'S NEW NATIONAL NUMBERING PLAN

Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

Why does Bahrain need a new numbering plan?

The availability of numbers in Bahrain has nearly been exhausted under the current plan. Thus, a new numbering scheme is needed to accommodate both the entrance of new operators into the market and the introduction of new services in Bahrain.

Why does this need to happen now?

The adoption of a new numbering plan is a critical step in the liberalisation process and must be completed to allow for market competition. The new numbering plan effectively provides the range of numbers necessary to ensure the equitable distribution of numbers to both current and future operators. ***This is especially important now in light of the fact that Bahrain's second mobile operator is due to begin offering service in December 2003 and must be provided with sufficient resources to do so.***

How will numbers change?

The TRA has devised the plan so as to make the number change as simple as possible for consumers.

Fixed Lines – The prefix 17 will simply be added all fixed line numbers
Mobile Lines – The prefix 3 to all mobile numbers

With the exception of the addition of these prefixes, numbers will remain unchanged.

For example, if an existing fixed line number is 444444, it will become 17444444
Similarly, if a mobile line number is 9123456, it will become 39123456

Why is the fixed line prefix 17?

In choosing a suitable pair of digits to add to the front of existing fixed line numbers a great deal of care was taken to ensure there was ***NO DISRUPTION to existing customer numbers.***

Numbers other than 17 simply could NOT be used because they are already a part of existing numbers. ***For example adding 55 to the front of existing fixed lines would have interfered with nearly 10,000 numbers that are already being used.***

The digits 17 were eventually chosen because ***just ONE number in the entire country began with 17*** and this was not even a customer number.

So 17 provided a simple addition to the front of existing numbers ***that did not require anybody's existing 6 digits to change.***

Why is the mobile prefix 3?

For the new mobile operator, MTC Vodafone Bahrain, to be able to launch service in December of this year, as promised to the people of Bahrain, a range of numbers that was not used at all, and which could be given to MTC Vodafone immediately, was required.

The only two ranges available in the entire numbering scheme as it exists today were those beginning with 3 (36xxxxxx and 39xxxxxx). The great advantage of this was that it was possible to give MTC the 36xxxxxx range and Batelco the 39xxxxxx range.

This meant that ONLY a simple addition of 3 to the beginning of all existing mobile numbers was required. Further, now all mobile numbers will begin with 3. Customers will always know they are calling a mobile number and they will know if they are calling a Batelco mobile (because it will begin with 39) or an MTC mobile (because it will begin with 36).

What about emergency and other service numbers?

Emergency services will still be accessed through 999.

Further, calling the operator, reporting a fault, contacting Directory Enquiries and all the other ***calls to your telephone company that currently only require three digits, will remain the same.***

Will International calls be affected?

Calling international numbers will remain the same as now, using 00 as the international prefix.

How did the TRA determine the need for an eight-digit scheme?

In devising a new numbering plan for Bahrain, the TRA not only assessed current demands for telecommunications services in the Kingdom, but also considered anticipated future needs given the fast rate at which demand for telecommunications services continue to grow.

Based on these projections, and "best-practice" examples from other administrations who've undertaken similar number changes, it was determined that an eight-digit scheme would provide for the greatest degree of flexibility, tariff visibility and number capacity for Bahrain. ***Importantly, it would also ensure that another number change would not be needed for a very long time, if ever, in the Kingdom.***

What other options were considered?

The TRA undertook a lengthy consultation process during which time it closely examined several options. These include ways of maintaining the current plan or adopting a seven-digit scheme. ***Neither of these options would allow for the same degree of flexibility, tariff visibility, number capacity, ease of implementation and cost-effectiveness*** as the eight-digit scheme adopted.

Would a change to seven digits have been less costly for businesses in Bahrain?

Absolutely not, business customers, regardless of whether a seven-digit plan or eight-digit plan was adopted would be required to make necessary adjustments to their signage, stationary and so on.

What an eight-digit plan does, however, is ensure that this will be a one-time cost for businesses. ***While an eight-digit plan ensures businesses will NOT have to undertake these expenses again for a very long time, if ever, a seven-digit plan may have seen Bahraini businesses incurring the same costs again several years down the road.***

A move to seven digits would cost Bahraini businesses the same amount of expense but would not provide them with the safeguard or security that the eight-digit scheme adopted has done.

Isn't the creation of 100 million numbers excessive for a population of 650,000?

It may seem that this is a lot of numbers for a relatively small population but it is very easy to underestimate what is really needed. Many countries have opted for limited number ranges such as those provided by a seven-digit scheme. After doing so, however, they have very quickly found themselves having to change again - this happened several times in the UK during the 1990's. The TRA have been careful to avoid creating a scarce resource. The eight-digit plan being implemented in Bahrain is in proportion to the long-term number scheme finally adopted in the UK after several unsatisfactory attempts.

In addition, it is amazing how quickly numbers are used up. For instance, with 999 as an emergency number, you cannot realistically use any other numbers that begin with 99; so one short code alone bars the use of 1 million numbers.

What other countries with characteristics similar to Bahrain have adopted an eight-digit scheme?

Other small islands with relatively small populations have also adopted eight-digit numbering plans. For the same reasons used by the TRA, regulators in islands such as Cyprus (population 771, 657), Malta (population 400,420) and Maldives (population 329,684) have introduced eight-digit schemes. Other countries in Southeast Asia and the Arab world such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Tunisia are also among countries using eight-digit plans.

Regulators in these countries, like the TRA, recognise that changing to eight digits is the most safe and secure option and the only plan that will ensure businesses will NEVER have to incur the cost of a number change again.

Further, other Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates already have eight and nine digit number schemes. Currently, land line numbers in the UAE are eight digits while mobile numbers are nine-digits long.

When will new numbers become functional?

New numbers will become operation on December 1, 2003, but the changeover process will only just begin on that date. A full transition will not happen immediately.

Both new and the old number formats will work for a period of six months so that residential and business customers have ample time to let their friends, family and business associates know that their numbers are changing.

What will happen if someone dials an old number?

New numbers will run in parallel with old numbers for a six-month period, ensuring that callers dialling an old number are connected.

When will old numbers stop working?

Old numbers will cease to function on June 1, 2004.

What will happen if someone dials an old number after June 1, 2004?

Announcement machines will be in place to inform callers that old numbers have ceased to function in Bahrain and provide them with new dialling instructions.

Will this affect consumer bills?

The adoption of a new national numbering plan will in no way impact bills for either residents or businesses.

What is being done to inform people that numbers are changing in Bahrain?

The TRA is undertaking an active public awareness campaign to make sure all residential and business customers are aware of the change, when it will be taking place and what they need to be doing to prepare for it.

How will people in other countries know that numbers in Bahrain are changing?

The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) has been notified of the change and this will ensure that all other countries are aware of the changes taking place in the Kingdom.

In addition, the TRA and Batelco are informing individual operators worldwide of the changes. This will ensure that operators in other countries will be able to guide their customers in placing calls to Bahrain once new numbers become operational.

Nevertheless, residents and businesses should let their friends, family and associates abroad now that numbers in Bahrain are changing ahead of the discussed deadlines.

**Full details of the National Numbering Plan can be accessed
on the TRA website at www.tra.org.bh**