

MOBILE AND WIRELESS – MAKING LIFE EASIER FOR THE SMALL BUSINESS

Most small business owners and employees will own a mobile device but it's still a common misperception that they are just for making voice calls, and texting. In fact, mobile and wireless technology can enable even the smallest organization to make a real difference to their business.

There have been massive leaps forward in the past year in mobile and wireless technology, with much promised for the coming 12 months. From nobody knowing what a wireless hotspot (or Wi-Fi or public WLAN) was, there are now over 2,000 such sites in the UK alone. This enables very high-speed wireless access in sites from coffee shops to airports to fast food outlets. All that is required is a WLAN card – available from under \$100 and increasingly included in laptops and high-end mobile devices – and a relationship with a WLAN operator.

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One way that WLAN has been helping small businesses is when they need very high network speeds – for example, if downloading large files or using video. Previously, this would have been either very slow with their existing fixed connections, or they would have needed to pay for high speed fixed connections for the rare occasions when they needed this bandwidth.

The last 12 months have also seen the expansion of higher speed mobile networks (GPRS), development of short-range wireless technologies (Bluetooth) and integrated and higher capability mobile devices, smartphones and PDAs. This can enable the small business user to have access to e-mail, calendars and basic spreadsheets while on the move. On return to the office, all the changes can be immediately synchronized with the office computer.

One of the difficulties facing the small business is how to match larger competitors in reacting to customers wherever they are and whatever you are doing. Mobile and wireless technologies can provide that level of customer service – for example, you might have a small sales team that spends a lot of time on the road and regularly need to get important data to clients but don't have the luxury of a day in the office. This ability to work on the move can easily add 20% more time to their working day.

As mobile devices and PDAs become more advanced, they are also incorporating other devices. Multifunction tools such as all-in-one printers are already essential to small businesses that need performance and functionality without compromising space. Multifunction mobile business technology is fast following suit in its increased use by allowing small businesses to save time, money and not least, the need to carry round several devices

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while on the move. Camera phones in particular, have great commercial opportunities for small businesses for which images are important such as estate agents, surveyors and designers. Such multifunction devices can save time and money, and technologies such as Bluetooth can allow an office 'free of wires' with printers, PCs and mobile devices all communicating wirelessly.

The current and evolving needs of the business need to be the starting point for thinking about how to use mobile and wireless solutions. Mobile and wireless technology should not be thought of as a panacea to every business challenges. But there is great potential for making great gains in productivity, customer support and even reducing costs. Small businesses have reduced costs by up to 15% using mobile and wireless technology to increase efficiency and reduce headcount. Perhaps even more importantly, it can make the stresses of being a small business owner far more manageable.

WRITTEN BY STEVE WALLAGE, FREELANCE IT & TELECOMS ANALYST



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