



New Dogs and Old Tricks?

It's rather like the game old stager and the young, slightly dumb newcomer.

On one hand there's the mature, wizened, slightly world-weary desktop computer market; lumbering along at a relatively gentle pace with only the odd Microsoft or Intel launch to disturb its peaceful slumber.

On the other you have the burgeoning mobility sector – youthful, brash, ever-changing, and more than a little yappy and skittish.

But there always was something compelling about getting a puppy, and the bigger, hungrier, and more complex the mobility challenge seems to become, the more businesses seem determined to adopt it.

In fact, the idea of equipping key staff with mobile capabilities beyond the good ol' mobile phone has never been more popular. And little wonder.

It's increasingly affordable; fast, wireless connectivity is becoming ever more ubiquitous and accessible; and the business that can offer its employees a more flexible pattern of working often has a better chance of attracting and retaining good people.

Mobile teams also tend to be more productive teams – their output can continue between client meetings, and despite travel delays, office closures, local disasters, or everyday events like the sudden need to stay at home with a sick child.

Actually though, we're all pretty familiar with the arguments 'for' business mobility. Where many of us are probably less knowledgeable is in what to do about it.



How – amidst the vast range of options available today – do you decide on the right set of solutions? Should you kit everyone out with familiar high-spec laptops? Maybe you ought to go more slim-line and hi-tech with a combination of Blackberries and smart phones? Perhaps you should be doing both?

In fact, beginning with any kind of product-based choice is the wrong way to go, says Rob Bamforth, principal analyst for service provision and mobility at IT industry watcher Quocirca.

Instead, the starting point in developing a coherent mobility strategy should be to enlist the right advice.

"Companies may be basing their decisions on incomplete information", he warns. "A business owner might think, 'My mate's firm uses Blackberries and likes them', or 'My IT guy only understands Windows so we'll have to go that route'."

"It's tempting to start with the hardware and then shoehorn everything else in to fit, but that's a mistake. Before you make any decisions, step back from the hardware, and even the connectivity and applications, and determine what it is you're trying to mobilise and why."

For example, Blackberries and other email-oriented handheld gadgets can be extremely... well... handy, if the main purpose is to give directors and sales account managers a fast and flexible way to send and receive basic messages and information while standing on station platforms or queuing to board a plane.

A fully-functional, larger-screened notebook, on the other hand, may be more appropriate for a manager deciphering sales figures or working

on a PowerPoint presentation at home; or for a financial advisor illustrating the performance of various policies and stocks to a client they are visiting.

However, if the main user is an engineer or delivery driver who, say, needs the ability to access and update job sheets, a more basic handheld device should be ample.

It's clearly very important to think about the user first; the type of work they're doing, and just what, exactly, they might want to do when away from the office.

Bamforth therefore advocates getting users' input before investing; specifically, polling staff to get a better idea of how they work and the types of device they'd feel most comfortable with.

It's all very well making a blanket decision to roll out Blackberry-type devices, for example, but if some users find the keypads and small screens too fiddly, and the lack of application functionality restrictive, they may rebel against using the devices, or start demanding laptops as well.

Which brings us to a whole new dilemma. Multiple device management.

The average employee will already be carrying around a mobile phone for personal use, so consider how many additional devices it is practical to expect them to lug about and switch between.

Some will embrace the idea of a single device that claims to do everything. Others will be happier travelling light with a Blackberry or similar, and a more substantial machine kept primarily at home.

Where the choice of device really does pose a problem, some businesses may do better to focus on making key applications and business data available to mobile workers regardless of the device in question. That may mean holding applications and key data assets centrally, with user access delivered via a web browser.

And what about payment models?

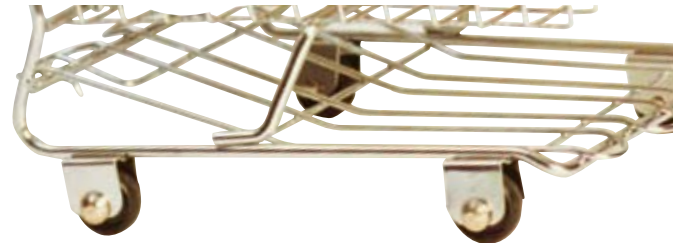
Firms favouring the web-access based route may find other options open to them too, such as allowing third party companies to run, secure, and manage their mobile applications under pay-as-you-go, monthly subscription based deals.

This can offer multiple advantages such as cost reductions, easier cash-flow management, and greater flexibility of application use, as well as the ability to offload some potentially pretty hefty mobile support logistics to an outside expert.

On the flipside though, the usual outsourcing caveats apply. i.e. Be careful you don't end up farming out your core competencies.

In application terms, remotely hosted email is already very popular, but the range of apps available on a managed, "Software as a Service" basis is growing almost by the day, and now includes sales/customer relationship management packages, remote team collaboration solutions, and many other common business tools to make the lives of remote and mobile workers easier.





It can be a good direction to go in, especially for the smaller business, says Bamforth.

“It means you can easily buy in more functionality, incrementally, as the number of users in the company grows. It offers a very flexible cost structure, you can see the immediate impact on cashflow and, if the mobile applications don’t deliver the benefits you were expecting, you can stop the costs immediately.”

It certainly looks appealing next to the most common alternative: “... a large capital investment... (and) a 3-5 year write-off cycle on specialist products which become obsolete very quickly.”

Where companies do opt to buy, integration with the desktop environment is often a key consideration.

Devices running the Windows Mobile operating system are popular with many IT managers because, while not offering quite the same experience as Windows XP or Vista, they provide a reassuringly familiar user interface, increase the likelihood of adoption (while reducing training needs), and pave the way for easy integration with existing office applications.

Once again though, it’s horses for courses. Windows wasn’t designed for the mobile environment, and isn’t considered as intuitive and easy to use as, for example, the Nokia platform, Blackberry mobile email, or Palm’s personal information management (PIM) environment.

“The key is to find something users are comfortable with, and that suits the main applications,” says Bamforth.

Most of the popular mobile applications support all the main devices and offer reasonable integration options. Within reason then, you can choose your handheld

and your operating system fairly freely once you’re beyond the ‘Windows versus other operating systems’ debate.

Connectivity needn’t be an issue, either, since most modern devices support GPRS, 3G, and WiFi as well as fixed-line connections, and network service providers serious about offering mobile data services to business customers now provide seamless transfer between different types of connection when users are on the move.

(Broadband – 3G or high-speed WiFi – is more and more widely available, while the WiFi hotspot’s march towards world domination continues apace).

There are however, several important considerations security-wise when it comes to the sensitive company and/or customer data likely to be held on your mobile fleet.

At the very least, systems need to be adequately password-protected so that if they fall into the wrong hands, the recipient won’t be able to do much with them. The same is true even if applications and data are being accessed centrally, with the device potentially providing a tunnel straight into the inner sanctum of the company’s network.

For greater peace of mind, additional protection – like code-generators and even biometrics (such as fingerprint recognition) – should also be a consideration.

A centralised approach to application and data hosting (whether on company premises, or via a specialist, secure provider), can again remove a significant aspect of this burden, allowing security (and indeed backup) to be controlled centrally, reducing risk and the overall cost of ownership.

“Think as flexibly as you can about future needs,” Bamforth urges.

“The mobile market is not as mature as the desktop market, so companies will need to protect themselves against future technology changes, as well as changes in their own mobile requirements, so it’s important not to get too locked into a particular product set or way of doing things.”

Protect yourself? Don’t get too locked in? Perhaps the palmtop has a few things left to learn from the desktop after all.

