



Handsets & Mindsets

There's a myriad of devices to choose when it comes to setting up your mobile workforce, and several operating systems to, er, boot. Mark Dye takes a look at what's on offer.

If, like most of the world's working population, you've ever sat at your desk dreaming about the world outside your window and what it would be like to be freed from the chains of the office, then the last thing probably want to read about is the latest natty new mobile devices. The kind your mate in sales will probably be upgraded to shortly so he can spend even less time in the office... the git.

If, on the other hand, you're one of those jammy so and sos lucky enough to be a mobile worker already, you're probably reading this over a big fat vanilla hazelnut latte and mulling over the day ahead while you wait for your 10am to show.

Oh the joys of going mobile! Better customer service and time management, faster decision making, improved work/life balance, increased productivity to keep the governor sweet... It's enough to give you a whole new sense of motivation and well being. Sounds like an old Blur song I know...

But hang on a minute. The idea that workers would rather not be stuck in the office isn't exactly groundbreaking now is it? It's common sense. Of course they wouldn't. The trick of course, is to find a happy medium, or even a happy media; to mobilise in a way that benefits both the workforce and the business. However, with so many service offerings, so many devices, so many architectures, and so many cultural intangibles to consider, getting it right first time can be tough.

The first thing for the business to consider is its rationale for pursuing a mobile strategy in the first place. Greater productivity? Faster order completion? Enhanced customer service? To get field engineers on site faster? These factors and more will impact your choice of device and determine the key criteria for its specification. Multi-gigabyte storage, push email, data synchronisation high-speed connectivity, location-based data capturing services... the list of possible ingredients is growing all the time.

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It's vital not to get the cart before the horse here – too many companies end up choosing their handsets before getting to grips with all the variables, and even before they've decided the applications they want to mobilise. Basic email and personal information management will demand a much lower degree of sophistication than will the full mobilisation of email, and of mission critical applications such as sales force automation (SFA), CRM for instance. (As one commentator noted, picking your device without fully defining your need makes about as much sense as trying to decide whether to travel by train, plane, or automobile before you know where you want to go.)

As Rob Bamforth, principal analyst for Service Provision and Mobility at industry analyst Quocirca puts it, "the business needs to set the scene for the strategy." Exactly how the 'scene' should be set will vary considerably according to the size of the business, its structure, its existing legacy systems, and its speed of growth, says Geoff Blaber, director of devices at CCS Insight – as the system will need to be scalable.

Another key factor is a solution's total cost of ownership (TCO). One device may appear considerably cheaper than another on the face of things, but other factors – additional server and middleware costs, client access licences, management overheads, and various data management expenses – will all have an impact on TCO.

It's also important to involve the workforce – to consult, set out choices, and provide sufficient options to cope with different working practices. The weakest link is the human one, says Bamforth, so active employee participation is key for getting buy-in and ensuring the productivity gains you're after come to fruition.

It's like this, says David Perry, director of mobile workforce management specialists, Cognito "The business value of any mobile device depends entirely on the way it is used, how well it is integrated into the organisation's working practices, and the IT environment in general."

If it needs to be said, there is no 'one size fits all' approach here. Accordingly, Perry suggests seeking out expert advice prior to investment.

And so to the devices themselves; an area that, with a list of manufacturers as long as an Orang Utan's arm, is sadly no less complex than the rest of the mobile sector. Nokia, HP, Motorola, LG, Palm, Sony Ericsson, HTC, Blackberry. And now of course, Apple. Yes, that's right. Apple.

Having usurped of the likes of Motorola, Palm, and all manner of Windows Mobile device suppliers, it has muscled its way into third place in the mobile phone market quicker than you can say MP3 player, and is not so much moving the goalposts as rebuilding the stadium.

According to Canalys, Apple shipped 2.3 million iPhones in Q4 2007 – some way behind the 18m smartphones and the 4m Blackberries flogged by Nokia and Research in Motion (RIM)

Never say never...

Most people might dismiss Apple's iPhone as a consumer product that's all about integrating your iPod and phone into a single form factor, but this is to undervalue its sales figures.

The 2.3m units Apple shipped in Q4 2007 certainly won't have made for happy reading in the Palm and Symbian camps (even allowing for the fact that much of the initial interest in the iPhone was probably driven by novelty and 'wow' factors.)

The iPhone has a long way to go before it can really compete with Windows Mobile and BlackBerry in a business setting, but just imagine what push email and 3G connectivity would do for the platform. It's not so long ago that we were all being wowed by a certain device from RIM...

respectively in the same period, but enough to pip Motorola to third spot.

As regards operating systems, the usual suspects remain at the head of the market – Symbian OS, RIM's BlackBerry OS, and, of course, Windows Mobile – something that doesn't make things any easier for those looking to buy a mobile OS for the first time.

Strengths naturally vary from device to device and from platform to platform, and each has persuasive advocates. Bamforth though, name checks BlackBerry's improved offering as a strong choice for mobile mail (now that RIM has moved beyond the overly functional feel and poor telephony quality of earlier models) and notes its increasing acceptance as a genuine business tool. ↪

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He also rates HTC's Windows-based devices, but feels that these lack the polish of RIM's BlackBerry offerings despite good MS Exchange integration and a solid ability to read MS Office format documents. HTC devices have also been criticised for relatively poor battery lives; something to bear in mind if you're unable to recharge during the day, says Bamforth.

As you'd probably expect, the Windows Mobile platform carries with it a certain comfort factor thanks to its name alone. And certainly, given its close ties with Microsoft Exchange et al, and its ability to reconcile to corporate security and control policies, it's becoming an increasingly popular option.

Another benefit is that, unlike their Linux-based counterparts say, Windows Mobile and Symbian are ready to run as soon as they leave the box.

Nokia has long been viewed as the field's pedigree player (and a certain sentimental attachment exists thanks to the company's years of dominance in handsets). There has, however, been some debate in recent months about whether Nokia's Symbian platform presents a little more in the way of complexity than that of the BlackBerry.

"One of the key reasons behind RIMs success has been the durability and reliability of the hardware", adds Blaber. "For large scale enterprise deployments reliability, simplicity and ease of management are essential."

In ROI terms it remains difficult to pinpoint a particular solution as delivering an especially superior return than any other – it varies significantly according to business size, solution type, and, in some cases, how operators package their hardware deals up with things like flat rate data tariffs.

One typically nebulous debate surrounds RIM's two solutions; BlackBerry Internet Service and BlackBerry Enterprise Server (BES). The latter is targeted at large enterprises, constituting a dedicated solution running on a dedicated server. Microsoft takes the view, says Blaber, that because its solution doesn't require additional servers and middleware, it commands a lower TCO than RIM's BES.

The reality is however, that TCO is dependent on a broad range of other factors such as the size of the business and its number of users. "The cost of mobile data can also be more

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expensive when using a Windows Mobile device connected to Exchange (compared to the BlackBerry solution)", adds Blaber. "As the (Windows) architecture requires the device to maintain a continuous connection with the Exchange Server to check for email, contacts, calendar entries and the like."

Clearly then, this is an area likely to see a great deal more discussion. So too is the emergence of next generation devices such as ultra mobile PCs (UMPCs) from the likes of Samsung and Asus. For now though, the relatively high costs of such hardware would seem to rule them out of contention for all but the most niche, specialist, and high-end deployments.

"They're good for individuals requiring a highly data-centric device for applications beyond email, (but constraints in) battery life, form factors, and cost mean they only fit a limited number of scenarios", explains Blaber.

And this really illustrates the wider, central point. That, in the end, business mobility is a question of horses for courses. "Ultimately, with any device, it's not the OS platform, the touchscreen, the stylus design or even the networking options that make the difference", says Bamforth.

It's how best they are likely to suit a particular individual, in a particular environment, in a particular set of circumstances dealing with the particular constraints and limitations of a particular business process.

"If it makes their life easier, it's a productivity and benefit booster. If not, it's at best just an expensive, oversized phone." ■

Devices worthy of note:

- ★ HTC Touch – touchscreen iPhone wannabe.
- ★ BlackBerry Curve – Superb. Everything you'd expect from a 'CrackBerry'.
- ★ HTC advantage – features a 5-inch LCD display, 'Nuff said.
- ★ Palm Treo 750 – HSDPA-enabled big hitter for suits.
- ★ iPhone – looks great. No HSDPA or 3G...for now. But could well go stratospheric as rough spots are ironed out.

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