

# The mobile phone: Killer application or application killer?

Time was when most people's exposure to mobile applications didn't stretch much beyond the basic tools that came with their Nokias and Motorolas – the calculator, a game or two; the occasional organiser.

Things moved on of course – with brick-like boxes marked Symbol and warehouses full of forklift trucks flashing RFID tags coming to the fore. Now though, or so the mobile handset manufacturers and operators keep telling us, all we need is a smartphone and the inclination, and we can access any application anywhere we want. Only we aren't doing that. Not really. Not yet. Look around next time you're out of the office. Chances are, the first mobile you see will be in the hands of some well-groomed executive who's just checked his email and is now saying something like 'I'll be on the 6.30 from Paddington. Yeah, a nice bit of sirloin would be lovely'.



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No change there. The perception remains then, that to do something 'useful' when you're out and about – process orders, update your product database, look up customer records – you still need a notebook, or at least an ultra mobile laptop.

According to some however, this is no longer the case. Chuck Dietrich, general manager for Salesforce.com's mobile division, recently demonstrated the use of the company's CRM platform on an iPhone for instance. (Not too unusual a tactic stateside where, especially compared with Europe, the iPhone is notching up a growing range of business applications).

Usability, he says, is everything – with devices like the iPhone and the BlackBerry leading the way in the push towards handset-optimised versions of major, business critical, strategic and line of business applications – and more and more businesses beginning to follow. Indeed, Salesforce now claims that two of its "larger" customers in the manufacturing and pharmaceutical sectors have recently dropped their laptop usage altogether, having instead deployed Salesforce software (among other applications) across a fleet of mobiles.

What's more, claims San Francisco-based Dietrich, setting up a mobile version of Salesforce couldn't be more straightforward – "a 10 or 15 minute effort" – and more of a business process exercise than a technical one. You just decide online what fields, contacts, or sales leads you want to see on the device. The end-user then clicks on a link on their handset, which is then populated with the same records and contacts present in the main system.

Antony Coleman, head of marketing for fixed, mobile, and convergence at BT, says that while many smaller businesses are pleased just to find themselves using smartphones for basic apps like mobile email, other applications are starting to gain traction too.

BT recently announced that it will start hosting Netsuite and SugarCRM applications, for example, and Coleman believes the next 18 months or so will see the emergence both of more email enabled devices and more hosted applications like CRM – especially for smaller businesses.

As several longer term smartphone enthusiasts have pointed out though (having learnt from bitter experience perhaps), while it's both exciting and useful to be able to access company data and LOB applications on your mobile, it is just as important to make sure these things are accessible only by those authorised to do so. Devices must, at the very least, be password protected, and some method by which an administrator can control and manage the chosen device from a distance is becoming a must.

Guy Fisher, principal at chartered accountants Shipleys, is apparently partial to emailing his clients from the tops of mountains, or when he is out skiing (sometimes both at the same time) and for him, only

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his Palm Treo 750 will do. However, should Fisher make a less than perfect snowplough turn at Kitzbühl and send his handset hurtling down a crevasse, Shipleys' London-based IT department is able to disable the Treo remotely.

The company tried out four handsets, eventually settling on the Treo because of its screen size, keyboard, and weight. But with Shipleys aiming to take its application mobility beyond basic Outlook and email usage, handset specification was just one of the criteria that had to be considered.

With the solution now in place, 25 of the firm's accountants currently use Treos (they started with 16) to keep up with what's going on in the office when they're out. More importantly though, they're also able to access the office database and client histories. ↪

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This has the added benefit of keeping essential, sensitive client and company data safe in the datacentre rather than sitting vulnerable on various end devices. "You only want one database, and ours is the centre of the firm's existence", explains Fisher. As such, he says, Shipleys encourages its people to leave all client information in the main central database, rather than in individual Outlook files held on personal laptops.

Achieving such functionality clearly wasn't easy however. And despite having a dedicated IT department, Shipleys were forced to engage with a firm of mobile specialists – Crimson Tide – in order to get their handsets to talk to their database via a Citrix dumb terminal network.

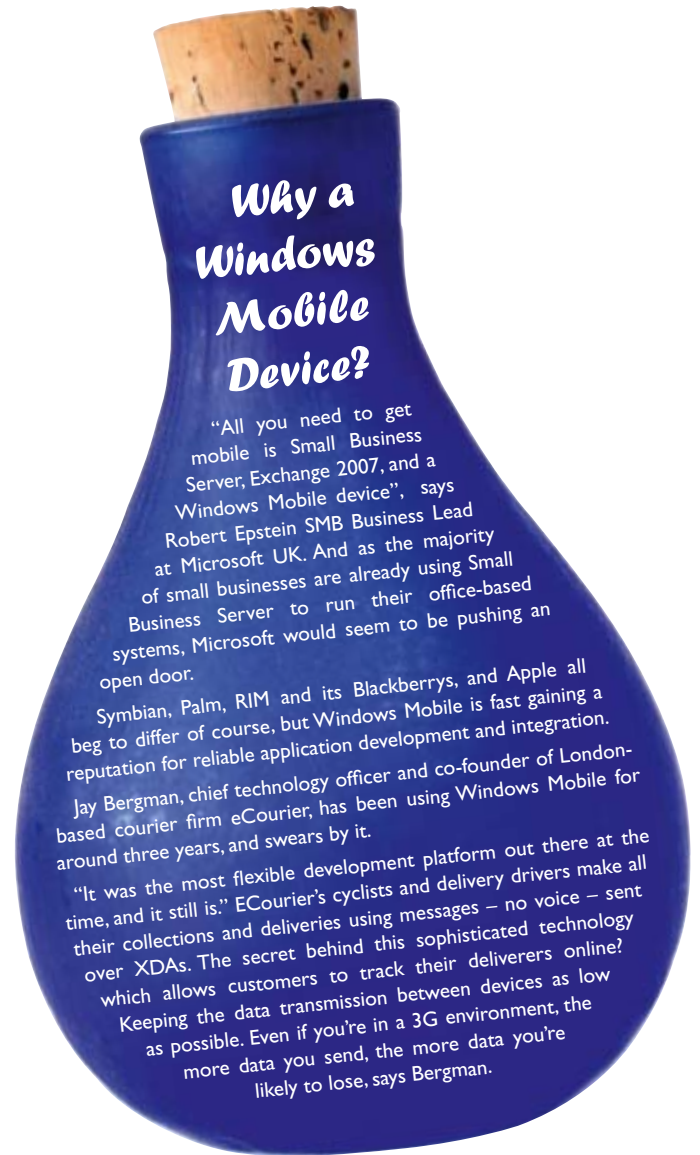
Barrie Whipp, Crimson Tide's executive chairman, believes that a great deal of confusion still surrounds data mobility in this and other areas – not least thanks to the impenetrable pricing and service policies emanating from some mobile operators. His contention is that while the operators spend huge sums promoting peripheral features like cameras and sat navs, they aren't nearly so clear when it comes to their text, call, and data tariffs.

To prove his point, Whipp points out that Crimson Tide employs someone full time to do nothing but work his way through mobile pricing structures to try to find the best deal for clients. "I think the networks continue to work hard to maintain their margins. (But) the offer to the customer is still blurred."

Crimson Tide is one of a growing number of specialist mobile application development companies – in this case facilities management, field auditing, and healthcare – that bill their customers on a monthly per user basis.

It's a popular model, says Whipp, as the monthly payments allow customers to sidestep the need to find £50,000 or £100,000 to fund a mobile interface for their office bound applications. He notes an ongoing reluctance in some quarters however, with many organisations still frightened of mobile applications and in particular of the capital costs involved with connecting their office systems with their mobile devices.

It's also worth noting one of the mobility market's key ironies at this point: that the more powerful, more functional, and therefore more sophisticated devices get, the more such providers are being asked to make them simpler to use. ↪



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In other words, some companies want their mobile employees to have not more, but fewer applications at their disposal.

Cognito, another specialist mobile developer, says that it is often asked to turn off the Internet browsing facilities in a phone, or to restrict the numbers that can be dialled.

"Customers are worried that their delivery drivers could run up huge phone bills, or look at inappropriate websites", says Cognito director David Perry, "so we lock down the mobile so that it can do one thing and one thing only."

He also recommends supplying staff with 'approved' phones, even though employees themselves will very likely have their own favourites. It's not always a straightforward process however – with mobile operators offering special deals on particular devices just because they're trying to shift a particular line of stock.

"We try to have approved devices, but it's a losing battle", says Perry. "Phones appear and disappear very quickly."

And even when the choice of device is clear, it's important to think long and hard about what applications and what specific data should and shouldn't be ported to it. So says Cognito customer Greig Dendor, systems manager at Alpha Heating and Innovation, whose mobile Goldmine CRM system interface allows its engineers and salespeople to retrieve customer information on XDA devices.

"It was hard work deciding what to display on the XDA given that the Goldmine database is very comprehensive", recalls Dendor. In the end the company decided to give its external salesforce access to customer contact details, their calendars, and new leads – but it would take five months to draw up a working specification for this for the XDAs.

Despite the significant effort they must undoubtedly put in, firms that successfully complete due diligence rarely look back. Done properly, mobilised applications can deliver major flexibility and efficiency benefits – reducing the interaction time required between field- and office-based employees, minimising duplicated effort, and cutting logistical back-office inefficiencies like retyping forms and orders.

Other developments could open up the application mobility market still further. Solutions such as proof of delivery systems like the one recently brought to market by POD Father.

New businesses in the delivery, warehousing, and distribution businesses are tempted by the fact that they only have to pay for completed deliveries on a pay as you go tariff, says POD Father managing director Alastair Broom. And POD Father is a hosted system, so clients have no software development to worry about.

As such, more widespread application mobility looks to be simply a question of time and customer education.

That's certainly Broom's view. He says that while marketing mobility to consumers is based on a device's whistles and bells – the spec of its camera, its MP3 player, its gaming interface – the rules are different for business users.

"SMEs haven't yet realised that the phones they can walk in and buy in the high street are incredibly smart and powerful, with a wide variety of business benefits." ■

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