
The ITSM view of wireless

Don't forget the basic principles of successful IT delivery

By Dale Vile, July 2007

A recent online workshop on the IT service management (ITSM) practicalities of deploying and managing wireless solutions for mobile and remote access demonstrated yet again that the genuine experts in any area of IT are the people out there doing it for real. The workshop was run in collaboration with our friends over at The Register, and through various surveys, polls and discussion groups we had well over 2,000 IT pros participating in one way or another.

What's really interesting when we do this kind of thing is that the opinions coming back from experienced practitioners are typically very pragmatic rather than glamorous, and can therefore seem a bit at odds with the more idealistic views we sometimes hear from the vendors, pundits and the press.

On the topic of what's important in a business class handheld device, for example, battery life and decent voice support were top of the list, with more "newsworthy" stuff like cameras, GPS and Voice over WiFi coming towards the bottom. The big message to the mobile industry here is that business customers would much prefer vendors and service providers to get the basics right before messing around with bells and whistles.

This very pragmatic view is also reflected in the way in which those living in the real world deal with the opposing pulls of users wanting the latest, sexiest kit, while IT people require everything to be properly secured, managed and supported. Too often we hear the romantic view that modern mobile devices are breaking down the barriers between personal and business interests, and that IT people have to accept the way this is changing user expectations of freedom of choice.

All very well and philosophically "right on", until your internal helpdesk and user satisfaction are crippled by users wanting assistance with a myriad of different devices that support technicians can't possibly keep up with, and the development guys complain about the impossibility of designing, building and testing applications cost effectively when they have no idea of the spec and form factor of the target environment. It's no surprise then that we were consistently told by those with more than a handful of mobile users that while it is important to take user wants and needs on board, the only practical approach is to stick to a pre-defined range of devices that IT is happy can be properly secured, managed and supported.

And the need to deal with IT realities such as these brings us onto another of the areas we looked at in the workshop - the question of BlackBerry versus Windows Mobile based email architectures. Again, pragmatics came through strongly, and given the depth and volume of feedback we received from practitioners with experience of these environments, there can be little doubt that the BlackBerry solution wins hands down when it comes to management and control in a production environment.

Mixed emotions were clearly evident here, however, with some implying they wished things were otherwise because they perceived the Microsoft client platform to be more open, capable and flexible. But when push comes to shove, you have to be able to manage things effectively, so for the time being, at least, BlackBerry remains the platform of choice for most IT professionals when considering serious mobile email deployments.

For those wishing to go down the Windows Mobile route, though, the general consensus was to consider a third party solution that can provide a similar level of policy driven management and control to that enjoyed by the BlackBerry contingent. The advantage here, of course, is that these kinds of independent platforms typically support a wide range of devices, not just Microsoft, which is handy in a world in which it is becoming increasingly more difficult to predict how device form factors, operating systems and needs will develop over time.

But wireless is not wireless without, well, the wireless bit! In our last discussion in the workshop we therefore looked at requirements for wireless networks and asked whether it's just about speed, or if other things matter too. One of the most interesting parts of this exercise was the result of a poll we ran looking at the relative importance of different connectivity related elements in relation to notebook PC and wireless handheld use. In both cases, top of the list was connection stability and consistency of performance.

Again, this is very much a back to basics thing, sending a clear message to service providers to ensure that they focus on the real world user experience. We need to get away from talking about headline theoretical speeds of the air interface (the radio bit), whether it be WiFi, WiMax, UMTS or HSDPA. All of the impressive numbers we hear count for nought if congestion or backhaul constraints mean your performance goes up and down like a Yo-Yo and/or you keep getting thrown off the network.

Pulling it all together, it's very clear from the workshop that wireless remote access is now way beyond the early adopter stage, and the use of both WiFi and cellular connectivity to meet the needs of mobile users is a serious mainstream activity. As a result, IT departments are thinking and acting exactly as they should, focusing less on all of the distractions that bleed over from consumer land, and more on making sure solutions are securable, manageable, scalable and fit for business purpose.

This should be regarded as good news for the mobile industry, but there is a warning in here for mobile operators and handset vendors in particular, who in most cases need to get a lot more IT savvy than they are today.

The bottom line though is that mobile connectivity is not something to be considered in isolation, and the best advice for IT professionals getting involved in this area for the first time is to apply all the same principles that are fundamental to the successful delivery of IT services in general.

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