
Business adoption of mobile devices

More questions than answers?

By Dale Vile, June 2011

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Some of the most rapid and exciting developments in technology are taking place around mobile devices at the moment. This is in theory presenting CIOs and business stakeholders with some great choices to help optimise the way people work.

However, while some might refer to the landscape as being 'rich and dynamic', a more pragmatic description for planning and investment purposes would be 'fragmented and volatile'. Against this background, formulating plans around mobile device adoption is not easy.

The first question that comes up when considering this is to do with its scope. If we anchor our discussion around business needs rather than specific technology categories and platforms, it makes sense to take an inclusive approach, looking at full-function laptops at one end, through to simple mobile phones at the other.

This is something we at Freeform Dynamics researched recently. Based on the views of 664 IT and business professionals, the [results of our study](#) suggested that all form factors (i.e. sizes, shapes and specs of device) will coexist. The often heard notion that touch-screen slates would render laptops universally redundant, for example, was not generally supported.

Indeed the importance of full-spec laptop PCs for mobile business computing was anticipated to increase rather than decrease over the coming three years. Improvements in price/performance, battery life and power/weight ratios are behind this, making laptops useful and deployable cost effectively in more business scenarios.

One substitution that does seem to be taking place is around handhelds. Evidence confirms that traditional voice-centric mobile phones are increasingly being replaced by smart phones.

When we pull all this together, the consensus seems to be that two device classes are likely to be 'must haves' for most mobile professionals going forward - the full function laptop PC and the smart phone.

In between these, the touch-screen slate looks to be a popular but 'nice to have' device. Over time, we expect a range of convertible and hybrid devices to also play a role in this middle ground, including 'transformer' style equipment that looks like a slate one minute and a laptop the next.

When making business decisions around form factors, there is no choice or combination that is likely to be suitable for business users across the board. An important element of the planning process is therefore user segmentation to generate a clear view of needs, wants and constraints within each group of users.

Application requirements will be included within this, but so too will the environment and scenarios in which devices are likely to be used.

Beyond utility, there is then the question of cost. The price tag on the device is part of this, but overall cost of ownership is the metric that really matters. Influencing this are questions around application availability, ease of development and deployment, and ability to secure and manage devices cost-effectively. These in turn are influenced by the software platforms underpinning the mobile equipment used.

Unfortunately, the mobile device platform space is a bit of an uncertain mess at the moment. The market is still not mature and to add to the volatility, a few big guns are conducting open warfare within it. Apple, RIM and Google are currently battling it out. Microsoft and its new ally Nokia are licking their wounds and regrouping on the side lines, with HP gearing up to enter the fray soon.

A further complication is the phenomenon of 'consumerisation', a big part of which is to do with users wanting their personal devices hooked up to the corporate network. This clearly creates potential challenges from a security, compliance and support overhead perspective, making the need to put some kind of policy in place more acute than ever. This would cover what is and isn't allowed on the network, guidelines for safe operation, and expectation management around what can be accessed and what will be supported.

When it comes to more proactive deployment of the mobile devices, the game is about keeping the number of variables to a minimum. This can be achieved by restricting the number of platforms supported or by putting platform agnostic application and management frameworks in place.

Given the volatility of the device space, we would favour platform-agnostic infrastructure on balance as this minimises the need for application porting and trying to coordinate management and security between different frameworks. There are, however, advantages to focusing on one or two platforms from a user experience perspective, and with Apple trying its best to restrict the use of non-native applications, you may need to put up with some redundancy anyway to support iDevices.

With so many unknowns, it's impossible to tie down every aspect of your mobile device strategy right now. Doing nothing and allowing activity to free-wheel, however, is not a sensible option.

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