Mobile messaging will continue to grow strongly even during the current global recession, and operators providing office packages targeted at small businesses will generate much of this growth, so long as they have the right applications to offer, writes Jon R Doyle

Mobile office goes virtual

Devices supported by CommuniGate Pro's Mobility Suite are:

all Windows Mobile 5/6 based and ActiveSync capable devices including Apple's iPhone 3G, Symbian OS capable mobile phones, DataViz devices that use RoadSync, Sony Ericsson P900, M600 and W950, Nokia E series, Motorola devices that use Motosync, Palm 700 smart phone series, Treo 680, Treo 650, LifeDrive and Helio Ocean

Mobile operators throughout the world are turning to the small and medium business sector for higher value customers to make up for declining revenues in traditional voice services.

CommuniGate Systems has found SMB subscribers are six times less likely to churn than consumer subscribers, and yield an average of triple the ARPU (average revenue per user).

Naturally such customers are highly prized and the challenge for mobile operators is in devising mobile value added services that are both sufficiently compelling to win them over in the first place and "sticky" enough to maintain these low churn rates. The key lies within the mobile lifestyle and digital natives, and mobilising the traditional office.

Numerous studies have shown that SMBs can save money and gain productivity by adopting SaaS (software-as-a-service) solutions, especially those technologies that are hard to maintain in a small office setting.

There is now a range of mobile devices to suit most requirements, and mobile networks are becoming capable of providing much wider access to the broadband messaging services needed to make the mobile office work.

The idea of the mobile office is simple enough: to make all the communications and IT services of the central office available to all staff who need them whether they are at home, travelling, on a customer site or at some other location. It is particularly relevant for many small businesses, such as a law firm or a doctor's office, where there

has long been a significant amount of remote and mobile working.

Yet many such firms have yet to deploy any premise-based enterprise class unified communications solution — hence the massive market potential for mobile operators.

In the past many small businesses have been handicapped by the lack of effective real-time communications and messaging. Lawyers have been unable to obtain case notes or ask quick questions at the last minute. Similarly doctors have been denied access to office staff and records that might help them in an emergency after a call out of the office, or at home.

Vital element

As these examples indicate, the vital element underpinning the mobile office is messaging and access to content such as documents and images. The arrival of mature unified communications services has been critical in the evolution of the mobile office, providing the framework that holds it together, enabling "presence" where each member of staff has full visibility of others' availability.

The combination of messaging, mobility and web presence with a domain name will prove a potent value added service over the next few years, according to ABI Research, because of their combined effect on business productivity.

As a result mobile messaging will continue to grow strongly even during the current global recession. Mobile operators providing office packages targeted at small businesses will carry much of this growth.

But to latch on to this growth, operators need the right package — combining email, web hosting and voice services with calendar synchronisation and push technology delivered at the right price points.

In the current climate especially, SMBs will be seeking value for money combined with ease of use and flexibility, so they can add more users and features just when they need them without paying for options they do not use.

CommuniGate Systems was quick to spot this potential and has developed a package that we are convinced gives mobile operators all the right hooks to tap into this highly promising market. We have brought together relevant components from our unified communications portfolio, all of which have already been field-proven inside the traditional customer base for these services, mostly made up of wireline operators.

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Software as a service

Most important of all is that we have met the essential requirement for successful SMB deployment on a large scale by making our CommuniGate Pro Mobility Suite perfect for the SaaS model with self-care interfaces and virtualisation.

This provides operators with a much more effective deployment vehicle, since it avoids onsite installation or management of software. As well as reducing cost of installation, SaaS allows rapid deployment both of the initial package, and of future extensions, tailored to the specific needs of the SMB customer.

New features can be added purely at the service end; the user will have access to these new services next time they logon to the Flash client or the operator can push changes to the mobile handset — making it simple from the provisioning and management perspective as well as easy for the user.

The desktop client, called Pronto!, is a powerful web 2.0 UC client that allows subscribers to gain access to all their applications, whether it is their PC, Mac or via any PC in an internet café — as nothing needs to be installed locally.

Pronto! is an important component of the mobile office offering because it enables the SMB subscribers to have a single dashboard no matter where they logon. It is the only genuine Web 2.0 client capable of delivering carrier grade UC services as well as media such as IPTV and video on demand.

Pronto! really does deliver on the promise of Web 2.0, by allowing users to access their full mobile office, including voice, conferencing, messaging and rich media services, from any internet browser anywhere in the world. Pronto! is based on Adobe Flash and Adope Flex technology, which means it can deliver UC services with the same look and feel across any combination of operating system and browser.

The ability to set up the mobile office for an SMB quickly without hassle on whatever mobile devices a customer's staff already have is critical for operators in what will be an increasingly competitive market.

Naturally SMBs will not want to replace their existing handsets and will not want the burden of significant training or adjustment for staff. They will want to get up and go almost immediately. The mobile office is designed to be plug and play either at the mobile operator's retail shops, or online in a simple registration portal.

The mobile devices can be configured by SMS and we have ensured that the Pronto! client supports nearly every known platform in use today.

Comprehensive package

The message for mobile operators is that we can give them a comprehensive package with all the right ingredients to prise open this lucrative market, with the required stickiness to retain customers. The critical ingredients of stickiness are web presence with a domain name, coupled with messaging integrated into business processes, particularly real time calendaring and push synchronisation for email and voice mail.

It is worth remembering that many SMB customers, especially smaller ones, do not have their own domain names yet, getting their emails via webmail, or POP accounts from existing fixed line service providers.

By hosting the domain name and building services around it, mobile operators can boost that stickiness at a stroke.

The mobile office also gives the operator pole position for deploying further added value services over the next few years as SMBs continue to become more mobile and increasingly reliant on handsets to conduct all aspects of their business.

Many SMBs are actually ahead of larger enterprises in their level of mobility. For many of them, portable devices — including smart phones and tablet PCs — will soon be the primary vehicles not just for unified communications but for accessing core IT applications such as customer relationship management, which will increasingly be provided via web-based SaaS models in any case.

But many SMBs are still unaware of the potential to improve productivity by installing mobile office. Effective marketing by the mole operator that is low touch is therefore vital for success, with the primary route being the existing networks of phone shops which are increasingly targeting smaller business customers with packages including special tariffs for multiple phones, email and data services.

The mobile office is a logical extension of such offerings, the key being that the CommuniGate Pro package is just as easy to install in the phone shop via the SaaS model: domain name can be set up and client devices cane be configured in minutes inside the shop.

With no server to configure, and no software to download, installation can be achieved by existing staff already dedicated to small business customers with relatively little additional training.

Virtualising the office

In effect we are virtualising the office, since the link between the service and a specific device or place is severed. Although all devices can never be entirely equal, since each is optimised for particular tasks, all can be united within a unified communications umbrella enabling staff to upgrade their presence and access all the key services wherever they are.

The range of places and devices from which we can access the mobile office continues to increase.

One development we are watching closely is the trend towards integration of 3G chips in cars. While the primary motive is to deliver "infotainment", such chips will also at a stroke bring the mobile office into the car. This will allow people to stay connected while on the road, without contravening laws banning use of mobile phones while driving.

Indeed people would be able to control their presence on the road, just as they can when at home or elsewhere, for example reading and answering messages displayed on a dashboard while waiting at lights or parked by the roadside.

Such extension of the mobile office will present additional opportunities to add value and derive additional revenues, for example via location based elements. But the mobile operator must go out and grab the market while it is still developing and the opportunity is there to build brand. ∎

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