

Mobile Office is a powerful value added service for 3G and WiMax networks, writes Jon Doyle

Building a business case for mobile unified communications

Store display for Mobile Office: virtualises all communications with access on the mobile



Wireless operators now have a huge opportunity to start exploiting their new 3G and WiMax infrastructures by selling value added services to small enterprises based on the concept of a virtualised and “mobile office”. For the micro-SME sector comprising firms with five to 50 employees, the business case for end-to-end services based on mobility is becoming compelling.

Mobile operators can deliver all the fundamental IT requirements the SME sector needs within highly affordable packages. The total potential revenues for operators across the whole micro-SME sector are substantial.

The key to scaling such services across many firms via a multi-tenant platform lies with the software as a service or SaaS model of delivery. SaaS enables rapid and straightforward provision, within a single package, of all collaborative, communication and scheduling applications including voice mail, instant messaging, shared calendaring, email, groupware, storage, and backup. There is the potential for upselling additional services and creating a flexible business model with great scope for incremental revenue growth.

The traditional suppliers of unified communications to large enterprises, such as Cisco, Microsoft and IBM, are not geared up for the micro-SME sector. Their solutions are too expensive, require in-house IT expertise, and involve unwieldy client software.

Mobile operators must seize the moment and target this market actively with a flexible SaaS package bringing the potential to claw back their investments in 3G and IMS-based networks made over the last three years or so. The time is right because the technical components underlying the mobile office infrastructure are now in place.

Firstly of course there are the 3G networks themselves. They provide the necessary widespread access to broadband mobile bandwidth. Secondly portable devices have come of age for the mobile office. In particular, the Apple iPhone 3G is heralding a new era of handsets bridging the gap between business and consumer applications suitable for accessing mobile office and unified communications services.

Then femtocell technology is fast emerging as the component bringing mobility into the central office for small enterprises, turning this into a home cell connecting devices to the GSM network over existing wireline broadband services based typically on ADSL. This neatly delivers the fixed/mobile convergence promised by IMS by integrating the fixed and mobile office and providing seamless unified communications reaching all places where people work. This also gives ample scope for intelligent tariffing, for example making voice calls free when initiated inside the customer’s femtocell in the main office.

At the centre, knitting these components together is the unified communications platform itself. This is where the CommuniGate Pro Mobile Office SaaS delivery platform allows operators to provide their small business customers with mobile office services from desktop to mobile devices.

Mobile Office virtualises all communications with access on the mobile using the AirSync protocol for synchronising calendars, tasks, contacts data, and email boxes. It can be accessed on any laptop or PC using the Flash client, Pronto!

The CommuniGate Mobile Office also allows access to a user-friendly, self-care service for basic configuration and maintenance, pushing these day-to-day tasks down to the subscriber and away from the provider.

This comes to an important point that must be kept in mind when serving the micro SME market — the cost of selling and support must be kept low while at the same time the SaaS package must be hosted on a powerful carrier class platform.

This incidentally is another reason why on-premises or enterprise-class products such as Microsoft’s UC suite cannot effectively compete in this micro-SME mobile office sector - its software is not carrier-class, has many individual pieces or components, and requires input from the operator, third party consultancy or the customer’s own IT department to keep it running smoothly with adequate availability.

Enterprise class solution prices skyrocket when used at scale. It is one thing to have a single enterprise with 80,000 people, an IT department, and a room full of servers. It is quite a different thing to have those 80,000 users spread across 16,000 small “hosted” companies, whereby you maintain the billing, provisioning and change management of the entire system.

Meanwhile the cost of sales and support has deterred many operators from reaching this micro-SME sector. While the sector as a whole may be large, the potential revenue derived from each individual customer does not justify use of dedicated sales or support staff. The mobile office for small businesses must

therefore be a light touch sale, executed from phone shops rather than in the field.

Such businesses, including law firms, doctors' offices and graphic design companies, may already be customers of the operator for mobile phones. It is quite likely they will have email services as part of a broadband internet package over ADSL or perhaps a Google mail account.

They may also have a web hosting service from a specialist company in that field, telcoms from the local carrier, and mobile plans from yet another company.

The pitch from the mobile operator then is not just to sell new mobile office and unified communications options, but also to bring all these existing components under one roof. This not only reduces the customer's administrative burden but also increases availability by migrating all services to a robust carrier class platform and creates new upselling opportunities for the mobile operator.

New opportunities will arise in large part through integration of these existing components, and perhaps introducing presence, so that for example an employee sending an email can at the same time see whether the recipient is available to speak or communicate via instant messaging if a quick response is needed.

Mobile Office should be a relatively easy sale to make even during the current recession. It can be positioned as a tool for achieving greater efficiency without any upfront outlay and might actually reduce on-going costs by consolidating services. Additional benefits can be added later when the customer requires them or feels able to justify the price.

Therefore an important point of the mobile office as a VAS is the ability to make use of the customer's existing devices and computing facilities. Armed with the CommuniGate Pro Mobile Office package operators can do exactly that.

Unlike its competitors, CommuniGate Systems has built its client framework in Adobe Flash, which is supported by every operating system and browser of any note. By using AirSync it can recruit any handset to the mobile office including the iPhone, Windows Mobile and Nokia devices. Furthermore Windows laptops, Apple Macs and desktop PCs can all be connected to the mobile office via a USB 3G dongle.

For many micro SMEs, the USB 3G dongle will be the only piece of hardware required to get up and running with the mobile office, hooking laptops and PCs to the 3G network. But the CommuniGate Mobile Office gives operators the ideal platform for cross selling additional hardware such as 3G broadband routers to connect multiple devices within femtocells, and also smartphones.

Indeed operators can view the Mobile Office as a vehicle for bringing their traditional wares to market including handsets, rate plans, additional equipment, and most recently data plans. It also creates opportunities for new plans that exploit the power of unified communications, gaining additional revenues from presence, instant messaging, and increasingly video calling or conferencing.

Some operators will have noted the growing appeal of video for social networking and messaging, driven by free platforms such as Skype. The critical combination of Internet bandwidth and cheap high resolution cameras is giving video traction as a component of messaging after some false dawns over the last decade or more.

While video may become a core component of the mobile office within a few years, the crucial ingredients that immediately give an overall package the stickiness to attract and retain customers are flexible mobile telephony, real time calendaring, and push synchronisation for email and voice mail. Instant messaging and voice over IP will also be required increasingly by smaller businesses.

Web site hosting is another important service that has been overlooked by many mobile operators when targeting the micro-SME sector. Many small businesses do not have their own domain names yet and would be willing to pay a modest premium for this within a hosted service providing stickiness and added value.

Storage/backup for email and other data including documents is another service that many small businesses are increasingly willing to pay for and dovetails well with the mobile office.

Unlike large enterprises, many small companies have inadequate back up for critical information whose loss by fire, disc crash, or theft of devices such as laptops could cause significant loss of business failure. Furthermore many small firms lack the in-house resources to make adequate provision for data loss and are increasingly seeking to outsource this.

The mobile office provider is best placed to provide storage and back up by virtue of being already responsible for the messaging and communication services that generate the data.

This leads to another specific point about the server platform underlying our CommuniGate Mobile Office. The CommuniGate Pro Unified Communications platform has zero "planned downtime" for change management, and provides a dynamic clustering technology in the event of hardware failures.

CommuniGate Pro is a true carrier-class product specifically designed for hosting or virtualising many thousands of small businesses in a single system image. Major operators such as Danger (T-Mobile Sidekick), Verizon, and Tele2 which provide fixed line and mobiles services have used CommuniGate Pro in the field for several years. Such a robust platform is essential if operators are to become single points of service provision via the SaaS model for multiple small businesses.

Equally important, this platform enables operators to attack this micro-SME target market quickly and inexpensively using normal retail marketing procedures, without having to recruit specialist sales or support staff. These include in store kiosks, flags, posters, displays, give aways and flyers as well as welcome packages for new subscribers. None of these measures require substantial capital or ongoing costs with the result that operators can achieve rapid return on investment in six months, with the added value of a sticky VAS to retain subscribers.

But while investment in the mobile office will bring a fast return now, the greater benefits lie further ahead as the world emerges from the current recession. By taking market share in the micro SME mobile office sector now while the opportunity is there, operators will be well placed to cash in with value added services and exploit future growth in data VAS services like real time video, making up for the decline of the traditional voice cash cow. ■

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