



Sharon D. Cuppett, Vice President, Wi-Ex

Teleworking and Mobile Technology – Making it work

Teleworking is more than a fad. Recent industry reports estimate that more than 12 million employees in the U.S. telework more than eight hours a week. This increase in teleworking can be attributed to numerous factors including the dramatic increase in the worldwide cost of fuel, the increase in the commuter time in large cities and the advancement of teleworking tools, most specifically, the increase in mobiles and their business productivity applications. Mobiles and smartphones provide all employees with the advantage of taking their office with them. Mobiles give employees the flexibility to balance work and their personal lives. It is common practice, whether proper etiquette or not, to check email or text a quick reply to a co-worker during a child's play, recital or ball game.

Despite the current economic condition, there are a few industries that are growing, the smartphone/mobile internet market is one of them. According to recent industry reports, the adoption of mobile internet devices will grow significantly from 13 per cent of Western European mobile users in 2008 to 39 per cent in 2014. The current economic climate may lengthen handset renewal cycles while fostering low-cost offerings, but the market will grow.

With this growth, the teleworker numbers will grow. Accordingly, companies large and small must continue to re-evaluate teleworking and how they can arm their employees with the tools needed to succeed while working remotely. The "must-have" hardware tools include smartphones and computers. With 13 per cent of the information workers using smartphones/mobiles and that number growing, it's safe to say that the mobile can be a key productivity tool for the teleworker. There are, however, a couple of downsides to the growing importance and dependency on the mobile/smartphone for teleworkers.

APPLICATIONS AND SECURITY

Unlike the PC or laptop that is bought and assigned by the IT department to a worker, many information workers, who have turned into teleworkers, have already purchased and use smartphones that are not approved or supported by

their IT department, thus creating security and support concerns for IT professionals.

Moreover, these workers go beyond using their mobile for checking voice mails and joining conference calls. These savvy mobile workers blur their professional and personal "mobile life" and use the mobile for email, checking sport scores and social networking while also accessing mobile application stores or operator portals for instant messaging, additional productivity applications, music, games and location-based services. The mobile internet activity is tracking to be similar to general internet activity. Those activities include using search engines, reading news, sports, downloading music, emailing, instant messaging and participating in social media activities, such as Facebook and Twitter.

In order to counter the security and support concerns of IT, corporate internet policies will soon expand to "downloadable apps" and include mobile internet access. IT departments will identify "approved" applications to help the teleworker work smarter. They may even buy the mobile, download the "corporate-approved" apps and set policies that no other apps are to be downloaded. Additionally, device manufacturers and mobile operators will continue to ensure smartphone features and functionality address both personal AND professional user needs.

Consequently, accessing online business applications and corporate email systems will also grow rapidly as businesses move to empower their mobile teleworking workforce.

INDOOR SIGNAL STRENGTH

One major challenge for teleworkers is reliable in-door mobile signal strength. In some areas, mobile signal boosters will need to be used to avoid any dropped or missed calls and data. According to the annual zBoost "State of the Cell Signal" Survey conducted by Harris Interactive and fielded December 8 – 10, 2009, 67 per cent of cell phone owners use data functions on their cell phones and, of those, nearly 60 per cent (57 per cent) experience problems with their cell phone service while using data functions.

The zBoost "State of the Cell Signal" Survey also found that 38 per cent of teleworkers experience cell phone service problems while teleworking, including poor signal reception or dead zones in their home (26 per cent) and dropped calls (21 per cent). In addition, the survey found that 54 per cent of teleworkers consider their cell phone extremely or very important to successful teleworking and 22 per cent consider their PDA or smart phone such as Blackberry, iPhone or Treo extremely or very important to successful teleworking. Other technology considered extremely or very important for successful teleworking included computer (88 per cent), high speed internet (84 per cent), and home phone i.e., landline (38 per cent).

Additionally, in the United States, 67 per cent experience problems including poor quality and 49 per cent have done something special in order to make or receive a call. This includes going over to a window, hanging out of a window, standing very, very still and even going outside until the call is over.

None of these behaviors are acceptable for a productive teleworker.

The IT or telecommunications manager must equip the teleworkers that have a poor signal with a signal booster. It is not enough to equip the teleworker with a mobile and approved applications. The teleworker must be able to get a signal in their work environment. The mobile signal booster basically takes the signal from outside and amplifies it inside. It allows the teleworker to take full advantage of voice, data and internet services on their mobile phones, including 3G high-speed data and video, instant messaging, business applications, pictures and more.

As more employees telework, IT departments will need to evaluate both the hardware and software applications needed for the most productive remote working environment for their employees.

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