

Smartphones – the mobile management headache

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Quocirca Comment

The spread of the enterprise smartphone

When the devices we now call 'smartphones' started to appear in the late 1990s, they seemed to be deliberately positioned as distant from the PDAs (personal digital assistants) that were prevalent at the time. Many people viewed PDAs as a bit 'geeky' and expected those who carried them to be bearded sandal-wearers from California. In fact, given the birthplaces of early devices such as the eclectic Apple Newton and more successful Palm Pilot, this was not completely unrealistic. However, PDAs did evolve into useful business tools, often as digital diaries but still labelled as 'companion devices' and synchronised to 'real computers'.

The early smartphones were different. Nokia's first Communicator was a phone that opened up to offer a keyboard and Research in Motion (RIM)'s early BlackBerry was a two-way pager, so independent communication was always at the heart of these devices. They may have had different target users – field force for the Nokia, executives on the move for the BlackBerry – but these also shared a common independent and self-motivated streak in their working patterns.

So much so that this was demonstrated in responses to Quocirca's early research into mobile device security. The protecting and securing of handheld devices was seen as a more difficult problem than that of securing the once standard mobile workhorse, the laptop. The main reason was the users, and their casual, almost careless attitude to the mobile assets in their care.

Much has changed since then. The numbers and variety of smartphones have exploded. The consolidation into one or two platforms, hoped for by many IT managers, has not materialised and if anything the diversity of platforms has increased. A recent Enterprise Mobility survey conducted by iPass shows that while the leading handheld platforms are BlackBerry and Apple, Windows Mobile, Symbian and Android all have

decent showings. Despite the fall in grace for platforms such as Palm, its recent takeover by HP will inject new momentum, and investment in mobile Linux, particularly in the Far East, will stimulate further options.

Appetite for smartphones among mobile employees has soared, partly fuelled by a consumer boom in usage with devices like the iPhone. No longer the preserve of a handful of ambitious executives or a limited crew of field service engineers, but now the default aspirational mobile device for anyone. According to the same iPass Enterprise Mobility survey, two thirds of mobile employees wanted a smartphone as their mobile tool of choice, with only a third preferring a laptop.

Issues for managing smart handsets

IT managers may now be more familiar with smartphone deployments, but the difficulties in managing fleets of them and the risk to security from the potentially over-casual attitude of users remains and is if anything worsening. When Quocirca once asked IT managers about ways to better secure senior executives' use of handheld devices, one quipped "tether it with string up the arm like children's mittens". With mobile fleets containing growing numbers of smartphones something stronger needs to be applied, and the challenge for most organisations is compounded in a number of ways:

- Platform diversity – of the several different popular software platforms for handsets, all are evolving at a rapid rate and new application programmer interfaces (APIs) continue to emerge for other components in the networks. Selecting one standard platform is not achievable, and in many cases users are now wanting to 'self choose' their own preference device type.
- User diversity – as numbers of mobile users have grown, so has the diversity of

roles and types of workers. Some are focused and self motivated, others are easily distracted and need management direction.

- Strategic vacuum – many mobile deployments have been ad hoc and have not formed part of a planned strategy.
- Technical obfuscation – while the smartphone market remains fast changing and immature, vendors will try to outmanoeuvre their perceived competition. An example here is the recent Apple/Adobe spat over Flash on smartphones which created market confusion.

IT managers responsible for their organisation's smartphone fleet will not be thanked for asking for extra resources either. Despite the probable lack of certain specialist skills relating to the devices and telecoms networks, most organisations are looking to reduce costs. Mobile is seen as 'the right thing to do', but a large investment in internal resources to support it, is not.

How to balance mobile value add against mobile overhead

Hard-pressed IT managers should look in two directions for help with the smartphone management challenge; internally to line of business management and externally to specialist partners.

Internally the emphasis has to be on matching technology to the business need. Why is the business keen on mobile working – does it make people more productive, reduce the need for costly office space, help recruit 'digital natives' (young, communications savvy networkers) or smooth environmental credentials?

An understanding of these business objectives sets the direction for a mobile strategy, which once defined and agreed by the business, helps IT management justify time and resources. They can then develop suitable policies to support the organisation's needs for asset management and security.

Where there are the inevitable gaps in knowledge, skills or resources, they should look externally. An independent eye can be cast over the current implementation to see if assets are being most effectively used, and if not suggest improvements. Service providers with further capabilities may be able to help define and manage policies, reporting on questionable user behaviours, cost centre overruns and lost or stolen assets.

It should be possible to reduce costs by bringing in external help, as managed service providers focussed on addressing specific needs such as mobile device management benefit from economies of scale. Using their specialised skillsets allows those precious internal resources to be deployed on projects that deliver visible benefits to the business, rather than providing operational efficiency or, as is more often the case, simply firefighting.

Conclusion

The management challenges caused by continued growth of smartphone deployments must be treated as a strategic issue. Organisations need to understand the business drivers that are stimulating mobile deployments and gain visibility of how this impacts individual employee habits and working processes. They need to accept a fragmented fleet of differing devices to meet the broad set of needs as well as user preferences, but should build a pragmatic policy framework that embraces employee flexibility, while re-asserting business control.

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Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

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