

Straight Talking – Citywide WiFi

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With all the recent announcements about cities and towns providing wi-fi internet access, one could be forgiven for thinking free wireless connectivity for all is here already and the future of mobile operators and service providers is in doubt. But the situation is a little more complex than that.

We live in a digital age where access to information - for business or personal benefit, using whatever form of technology available - is expected by many in the community. But the information supplied has to be relevant and valuable to the consumer. The more closely linked content providers are to the context of the user - who they are, where they are and how they gain access - the better, and this is why mobile information and services have become so interesting.

Most of the announcements of yet another wireless network covering a city district revolve around flooding an area with wi-fi coverage and the lure of more widely available connectivity - with a mixture of free and paid-for services offered over the network. These typically must then involve some kind of public/private partnership with institutional bodies working alongside commercial suppliers.

If any of these developments are to be long-term successes, the needs of each of several groups must be met: the public sector, typically local government, the commercial technology suppliers and the end users or consumers of services.

A project called I-city in the Belgian city of Hasselt demonstrates some of the challenges faced by this mixed approach. Like many of these projects, I-city combines the needs of businesses, local government departments and network providers and provides a set of services for the local population. It is seen by those involved as an extended testing ground for mobile applications and services - looking at what citizens respond to as well as technical issues such as how solid the network is and whether it will scale.

Consumer-friendly services are presented as a dashboard of icons on the laptops and PDAs of citizens that live and work in Hasselt. I-city makes intelligent use of location and personalisation to ensure that services are relevant to the citizen/consumer.

From the user's perspective, it's all quite simple. If there is something in it for them, they will use it; and if it is of real value, they may pay for it.

The public sector drivers are somewhat more complicated and will be based on local or national government policy objectives. Some services will be provided because they meet community needs, or support the communication needs of local government, rather than being sold for profit. The services being provided by local government might also fulfil an obligation for constituents to have access to government services, or they may go further and stimulate business, tourism or regeneration in the area, or enhance the local authority infrastructure.

There are many reasons why cities are going wireless. In some countries - for example the UK - central government has mandated the e-enablement of local government services and is now concentrating on bridging the 'digital divide'. This could be accomplished by broadening access to electronic services and seeking efficiency gains through the use of technology.

Funds are frequently available to invest in metropolitan wi-fi projects, and advice is also typically provided by co-ordination services such as the UK's Project Nomad. These can help prime the budgets for building a network but will not provide resource on an ongoing basis to sustain the delivery of services. Even free services must be paid for somewhere.

Thus industry partners must be incorporated into the programmes to provide the commercial footing. In I-city, this includes software companies, network operators, content providers and systems integrators such as Cisco, Fujitsu Siemens, Microsoft and Belgian service provider Telenet. This collection of companies adds not only the right mix of technical skills needed for such a project but also some commercial realities which even social and political projects must embrace.

I-city's foundation services are built around the Microsoft Connected Services Framework (CSF) which encourages a clutch of generally useful applications such as messaging, discussion forums, local news, photo albums and mobile blogging.

Residents living near a proposed real estate development, for example, could receive their own news feed from planners, including photos of similar developments from the prospective builders, and discuss the plans on their own discussion forum. The idea is that application pieces are connected into a recognisable service, and presented to citizens in a way that makes sense to them.

The flexible IT and communications architecture and core services give a solid foundation to build upon but to move beyond the conceptual phase these projects have to show a viable return. That means profit for commercial providers and demonstrable results for the public sector services - whether in efficiency gains or improving access to services. This means the management of the content and services lifecycle has to become embedded in the local services communications, planning and even election processes.

Ultimately, local authorities are not able to run constant communications services. This is where commercial service providers can step in. The relationship here may be complex, in the same way

that the relationship between developers and planners balances permission to build with making contributions to the local infrastructure.

Forward-thinking authorities will actively pursue these commercial relationships - and ensure the commercial needs of service provision are met. Even public-private partnerships for social gain must have hard-nosed business value. The real challenge in this complex process is to ensure that the total value of all services, whether commercial, social or political, is measured and taken into account.

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