

ComputerWeekly – It's not Size that Matters

By Clive Longbottom, Service Director, Quocirca Ltd

We seem to be going through the form factor wars again – not only do we have desktop-replacement laptops, laptop-replacement tablets and tablet-replacement PDAs, but we have the phone handset trying to take the multi-media market by storm, and -Microsoft's Origami machine trying to be all things to all people.

But are the suppliers understanding the issues, or are they just struggling and trying to create short-term markets to bolster revenues?

Common sense would predict that a machine that brings together as much functionality as possible would mean fewer devices to carry, and therefore fewer devices that can be lost, that need information synchronisation, management and so on.

However, the idea of trying to watch streamed television or films on a two-inch screen does not grab me, nor does a small PC capable of running office applications but with a battery life measured in minutes.

It is not as if we have not been here before – try persuading a heavy mobile phone user that a PDA or Blackberry phone is cool. They might decide to use a PDA or a Blackberry as a data device and for its pose value, but standing with a slab of hardware held to your ear is not seen as cool by the Armani-suited sales guys out there.

Try looking at in-depth, business-important spreadsheets on a PDA and you will rapidly decide that a laptop may be heavy and a pain to carry around, but at least you can get some work done. And make yourself dependent on the laptop for voice over IP telephony and you will suddenly decide that a standard GSM mobile phone has greater coverage, and does not take three minutes to start up.

That we have massive redundancy of function across the multiple devices we use is neither here nor there. That we could combine radios to save battery life, or we could use specific input/output devices using ultra-wideband technologies to increase flexibility just does not seem to count.

Users have decided what form factors suit them – whether this be a bar-shaped or clamshell mobile phone, the standard PDA format, or a small or large format laptop.

For anything else to create a sizable market will be difficult to say the least – and I think that this is where Microsoft has got it wrong with Origami.

To me, this is the Ford Edsel of the computer world – on paper, it seems to do what everyone wants it to do. In practice, ask anyone who has tried one, and once they have got past the "wow!" factor, the response seems to be, "Yeah, but what does it do for me?"

As the search for the killer application for different form factors and different wireless technologies goes on, the suppliers seem to have missed the point that this is not what the user is looking for. It is a killer cocktail that is required: a range of offerings on a specific device that makes sense.

Sure, let's pick up our e-mail headers on the phone – but if there is an attachment that I need to deal with, I will start up my laptop, thanks. Stream me previews of films, but then allow me to subscribe to have them streamed to my laptop/desktop when I have more time at home or in a hotel. Allow me to use VoIP if I have my laptop turned on, but let's combine the billing for VoIP landline calls with my mobile phone, please.

It is not the form factor that firms should be fighting over, it is the offer. Suppliers should be looking at making sure that the functionality package is form-factor-agnostic – that is the way to success.

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