

IT Analysis – Mind the gap – mobile coverage issues and the SMB

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Mobile communications have transformed both personal and working life. Not only do most of us regard the mobile as one of the three items we check we have on leaving home – wallet or purse and keys are the other two – but the mobile number is likely to be the primary business phone number. Recent Quocirca research commissioned by RadioFrame Networks looking at the communications needs of small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) backs this up. The contact routes that appear most on business cards are email address and mobile phone number, with switchboard numbers and especially direct dial fixed extensions lagging some way behind.

The mobile is critically important for some SMBs as not only do a third overall not have a direct dial or fixed phone extension listed on their business cards, but in those with fewer than 50 employees, over a quarter no longer bother with a fixed phone at all. For them and perhaps many others, the mobile has become the hub of business communications, boosting the productivity of time spent outside the business premises.

No wonder then that combining the individual flexibility benefits of mobility and the organisational management needs is becoming of interest, with a telecoms industry now seeking to offer the benefits of both fixed telecoms and mobile telecoms through some form of fixed mobile convergence (FMC). This needs to be evaluated, and there are some key questions SMBs should ask when deciding where to invest, outlined at the end of this article.

Bringing mobile into line with long held guiding principles used for purchasing fixed telecoms services highlights three issues that affect all those struggling to manage a fleet of mobile phones across their workforce: control, cost and coverage.

Control relates to who provides the mobile phone and pays for the underlying contract – organisation or individual? While it might seem simplest to allow employees in SMBs to do what they like, bringing their own mobile devices to

the business quickly causes problems when the phone links into the IT systems – for example for mobile application and mobile email – and results in a mess of incompatible chargers, headsets and phone capabilities. This is even harder to manage in companies that are unlikely to have dedicated IT staff.

The free for all approach also raises cost issues not only in the management and control of bills, but also in that the company may miss out on cheaper tariffs by not having its mobile fleet with the same operator. Cost is already the main concern for most companies when considering mobile telecommunications.

Coverage however can become an issue for those organisations where a corporate choice of mobile operator is taken and applied to all employees provided with mobile phones. These decisions will often be taken purely on price, but with mobile as a primary form of contact, some thought will also have to be given to the level of coverage.

Some SMBs have clearly struggled with this decision, as over a third report occasional or frequent problems in obtaining a signal while on their own business premises. In one in six cases employees have to move around the office to seek out a signal, and in one in twenty employees have to go outside to get a signal. Not only is this frustrating for the individual, it also wastes time, and if the calls are important it creates a poor impression. Ultimately it impacts the bottom line.

However, many employees spend at least part of the business day working from home. Issues of coverage here are more marked, with almost half of SMBs believing that some employees will probably or definitely be having issues obtaining a mobile signal at home. This may be more pronounced when the organisation has a single corporate contract, as even if that takes into account one mobile operator's coverage at the company's premises, employees' homes might be in locations far better served by other operators.

As consumers, employees will have chosen the best deal for themselves, and if home coverage is an issue with one operator they will have sought out an alternative. But while working from home, their employer would like the business supplied mobile phone to still work. So in taking control, the business might run the risk of making those working at home less contactable. Given their increased reliance on the mobile, SMBs need to be even more aware of these issues and how to deal with them.

The issues of cost and coverage in particular are those often addressed as part of the marketing messages surrounding the many suppliers who are promoting services under the banner of fixed mobile convergence (FMC).

These are a mix of traditional large operators, historically offering fixed line services and now wanting to embrace mobility, existing mobile operators seeking to extend their reach while containing costs, and new entrants looking at what spectrum is becoming available and how they might capitalise upon it.

Underpinning these offerings are many differing advances in technology, each bringing their own complexity. There are also options to combine more elements of communications into a unified whole. While larger businesses may have the luxury of resources and support to explore several different approaches to see how these may advance their business to make them more competitive in the future, SMBs just need something to help with the task at hand.

With that in mind they can still look at how to address the issues of control, cost and coverage, but with a pragmatic rather than technology-tinted view of the potential FMC solutions.

- **Cost.** Does it really save money, and how will investment costs be recouped? To manage cash flow businesses need ongoing bills be predictable and flat, rather than outpacing value gained.

- **Utility.** For example, does it require specialist training or for users to change their behaviour? SMBs need something that works out of the box and delivers business benefits without getting mired in technology or jargon.

- **Individual value.** Does it make the working day simpler for employees as well as the organisation? Providing employees with tools they value encourages them to be productive.

- **Ubiquity.** For example, is it applicable and cost effective for all types of employee? SMBs cannot afford the time, skills or effort to mix and match different solutions.

- **Quality.** Voice calls are a basic business need – does it sound right? Low call quality and frequent disconnections present a poor image.

The technology employed to deliver FMC is often given far too much prominence, and sold with a vision of a unified multimedia, multi-format future, when all many SMBs want to do is just communicate – coverage with cost control. For a further exploration of this area of mobile communications for SMBs download Quocirca's free report "[Loud and clear](#)".

About Quocirca

Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

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.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

Quocirca works with global and local providers of ITC products and services to help them deliver on the promise that ITC holds for business. Quocirca’s clients include Oracle, Microsoft, IBM, Dell, T-Mobile, Vodafone, EMC, Symantec and Cisco, along with other large and medium sized vendors, service providers and more specialist firms.

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