

Google's Chrome OS will struggle to win over business users

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As Google prepares to broaden its attack on the end user device market with its Chrome operating system, it may pay to look to the past for comparative approaches to see what future problems Google may find.

Chrome OS is an operating system based on a Linux kernel, but focusing on using Google's Chrome browser as the main window onto doing anything. The majority of functions are served from the cloud – an approach much vaunted and hyped as the direction for pretty much anything in the future.

A comparative market to Chromebooks has been around for a long time in server-based computing. Early thin client devices were essentially dumb terminals – a simple device that could render the visual aspects of what was happening down at the server level, where the desktop image was held. However, they have evolved into what are essentially cut-down PCs, with USB support, local intelligence and so on.

Google has tried to deal with this right from the start – Chromebooks have USB support and have a degree of local power used to support HTML5 applications that can provide offline support through a period of disconnection. This is OK in many cases, but Google has an on-off history in providing support for Google Docs.

With roaming data charges being extortionate, many businesses will think twice in using devices that have a high dependency on the presence of a good internet connection unless full offline support is provided for general work – and that continued vendor support for such offline applications is guaranteed.

It is also a given that HTML5 will be an evolving standard. Chromebooks auto-update when on-line, and it only takes a short amount of time – but this could lead to bloat as new functions are supported in HTML5, and as new functionality is demanded by the users, forcing Chrome OS to provide additional functions.

With Google already stating that plug-ins are not the way forward, this means that any new functionality needs to be in the OS itself – and so the bloat grows.

Google will also be facing a raft of competition – Apple has defined the tablet market, HP is ramping up products with its WebOS platform, Microsoft still has a market for both its existing Windows 7 OS and for its new Windows Phone OS – all of which offer much of the functionality that Chrome does – but also provide greater off-line capabilities.

Although Google has tried to head off any security concerns with built-in VPN support, advanced security built in to the kernel and secure cloud storage, the perception remains for many that the cloud is still not secure enough for all commercial activity – and as such, a device so dependent on the cloud will face push-back from business users, while competitive devices may well be used increasingly in a hybrid local/cloud manner.

At the moment, it looks like for those who want more of a casual use web-access device, Chromebooks may be of interest. For general users looking to work while mobile, more functional slates and laptops with built in capabilities enabling them to work well while disconnected may remain the way forwards.

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