

COMPUTERS & TECHNOLOGY

JUST A CLICK AWAY

Developing Technology Is Getting
Business Done, Anywhere and Everywhere

By
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Offices across the country are becoming increasingly virtual as technology allows employees and business owners, in both large and small companies, to get things done from anywhere quickly and easily. And whether the newest addition to the technological repertoire is one small application downloaded to a cell phone or an expansive security system that can be viewed directly from a laptop, they aren't being seen as bells and whistles anymore, but rather as necessary progressions in the professional world.

The employees at Hogan Communications knew that the company's owner, Sean Hogan, was away last week. But they didn't — they *couldn't* — rest on their laurels while the boss was away.

For the most part, that was because Hogan's communications system and network installation and support business is booming. But the company's employees also knew that Hogan could be watching.

Digital security and monitoring systems are just one of the many products Hogan Communications, based in Easthampton, sells, installs and services — and also uses as part of its own operations. Hogan said they represent not the future of technology but what is becoming the norm — in short, the virtual office.

"Businesses need the ability to track and maintain what is going on in their

offices at all times," he explained.

And increasingly, employees and companies alike are taking advantage of developing technology to monitor all aspects of their business from virtually anywhere. The telecommunications and digital technology industries are responding in kind, diversifying products to offer a number of services, improving them to offer quicker, more efficient service, and streamlining them to cater to a fast-paced world.

And that world seems to be embracing emerging technology faster than it can enter the market; the trend toward, smaller, faster, smarter continues, and the digital age demands that one device be able to accomplish several tasks with little effort.

The workplace is not immune to the speed at which technology is changing, and keeping pace with technological changes in

the office can present a number of additional challenges brought on by cost, the integration of different systems, and the tech-savvy of a given company's employees.

But technology is also changing the face of the American workplace, making it increasingly accessible. Today's technology allows for more employees to step away from their desks while lessening the effect on productivity, or even increasing it.

It gives road warriors increased access to their offices as well as the information they need to better do their jobs, lets the CEO check in on the office from vacation, and allows the new mother on maternity leave to maintain her position. It also enables companies with multiple offices to better communicate, and can decrease instances of wasted time, error, or even crime.

Further, as technology continues to evolve and become a greater part of everyday life, the latest bells and whistles become less amazing and more expected by the buying public, and that's only making

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manufacturers work harder to create the next product that will make professional life even easier.

It's Got a Ring to It

In the current market, developing new products and services for the business world doesn't mean inventing an entirely new gadget or gizmo, but rather adding to those that most people already use.

And with a cell phone in everyone's purse or pocket, business applications that are accessible through the phone are one of the hottest commodities wireless companies depend on.

Voicemail, E-mail and text messaging are already standard features on phones used by business professionals, but Internet access has also opened up a sea of possibilities that are applicable and helpful for many professionals, either independent of the office or connected to a desktop or office-based server.

Abra Degbor, public relations manager for Verizon Wireless, said that applications completed from mobile phones or personal assistants such as Blackberrys are becoming as common as computer-based tasks, creating what she calls the "third screen phenomenon."

"Our lives revolve around three screens," she said. "We have the television, the computer, and now the screens on our phones."

Degbor listed a number of applications available from mobile phones, including iDatebook, which provides access to a desktop calendar, iPhonebook, which lists all contacts already in Microsoft Outlook, Palm, or other related system, and Mobile Expense 2.0 from Rocket Mobile Inc.,

which allows travelers to create expense reports while on the road and send them directly to any E-mail address.

For companies with a strong field service

Company, and OmniOne, created by QWBS Inc., a dispatch system that allows for communication with a mobile workforce.

Telecommuters can also access traffic

translation services to their phone, allowing them to look up a word or phrase in another language.

"All of these applications save a lot of time and money for people who are out and about, and increasingly, that's everyone," she said. "Mobile professionals like myself are using this technology all day, every day, but other professionals use mobile technology more and more, too."

Because that technology is more discreet, Degbor said, attorneys have become some of the most common users of text messaging, for instance, and real estate agents, who can easily access MLS listings instantly while on the road, are finding that mobile technology is actually creating a major shift in the pace of their jobs.

"Mobile technology absolutely changes people's jobs and how they do them," she

"All of these applications save a lot of time and money for people who are out and about, and increasingly, that's everyone."

component, Degbor suggested TimeCard, available from Electronic Company of NZ Limited, which allows employees to clock in and out, capture job data, and extract payroll information, Eservice, a wireless job dispatch system also created by Electronic

information, get directions, take advantage of services such as AirFone, in order to use their phone when flying, or check the news, often with the ability to watch video clips instead of just reading text.

Degbor said mobile users can even add

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Sean Hogan, owner of Hogan Communications, sits near part of the IP Phone system his company uses — and sells.

Staff Photo

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said.

Marcia Simon, part of the public relations team for Verizon Wireless as well as for Parrot Inc., the world leader in car kits using Bluetooth wireless technology, added that as mobile devices become the standard for a number of applications in addition to placing and receiving calls, safety and convenience become a greater focus for companies manufacturing products that work with wireless phones, PDAs, headsets, and other devices.

Parrot, for instance, has a number of car kits available, but recently unveiled the EasyDrive car kit, which plugs into any vehicle's cigarette lighter for hands-free phone function.

The twist, though, is that the unit works regardless of where the phone is in the car. Parrot accessories are compatible with all Bluetooth phones, which are becoming more widely used in the U.S. at a rapid pace, and are already common in Europe. Other hands-free kits similar to the EasyDrive system come equipped with GPS navigation capabilities or LCD display; Simon said conversely, the CK3000 Evolution car kit caters to customers who want a basic, affordable model.

"Even if it's stashed in your purse or under a pile of papers in the back seat, voice commands will activate the phone's send and receive functions," Simon said of the Parrot's hands-free technology. "And you never take your hands off the steering wheel."

I Spy

Hogan agreed that mobile, wireless, and Internet-based applications are indeed changing how people do their jobs, and also the environments in which they work.

He said that, in addition to selling, installing, maintaining, and updating a number of Internet-based and digital systems for companies of all sizes, Hogan Communications also uses nearly every product it offers.

IP phones, for instance, which use downloaded software and an Internet connection to place and receive calls, allow Hogan to give clients one phone number and receive their calls in Easthampton, in his satellite office in Springfield, on his cell phone, at his home, or on his laptop computer, wherever he may be.

"It gives me the capability to remotely connect anywhere I am," he said, noting

that one benefit, in addition to convenience, has been a significant decrease in use of cell phone minutes.

IP phones also allow for greater access to unified messaging systems — the ability to access faxes, E-mail, and voicemail, for instance, all from one place, such as Microsoft Outlook. Hogan explained that unified messaging isn't new, but is becoming more widely used as more businesses move toward Internet-based applications.

"IP phones are a percentage of every sale we make," he said. "Right now they account for about 35% of our sales, and next year, that percentage should be up around 60%."

Hogan said he expects that spike in IP phone sales because of the increased acceptance of technology that makes people's jobs easier and more accessible from anywhere.

"People like time-saving technology. This technology also gives people more control over what they have."

"People like time-saving technology," he said. "This technology also gives people more control over what they have."

That control is gleaned, Hogan explained, from the added ability to monitor day-to-day operations, a better handle on sprawling costs ("being able to connect from anywhere reduces the need for added office space," Hogan offered as an example), and more complete supervision of the office environment and employees — IP phone systems allow for the monitoring of a phone call's length, duration, the time of the call, even how long a customer remains on hold.

"It allows you to do better business and curb problems quickly," Hogan said.

IP phones and the ability to keep tabs on calls aren't the only way that business owners can ensure that their companies are running smoothly in their absence, however.

Hogan also endorsed the use of DVR, digital video recording, those digitally-based

monitoring systems that let him see what is happening at his two locations in real time, or, in playback mode, for up to six months.

Like an IP phone system, Hogan can view his DVR system at any time from anywhere, and also create still photos from images, track movement during specific time periods, and view several locales at once on his laptop.

While security is a major concern, Hogan said the monitoring systems like his own are moving more toward "asset control" than Big Brother.

"Especially with liability such a major concern these days," he said. "Security was the objective after 9/11, but now it's more a question of facility management."

That can mean capturing someone illegally using Hogan's Dumpster (that happened), or reviewing a delivery of fiber-optic cable suspected to be four reels short, converting the image to a file that can be E-mailed, and sending it straight to the vendor (that happened, too).

Hogan said although he trusts his employees implicitly, the concern of asset control also extends to how those staff members use the company's resources and spend their time. While viewing those streaming images, Hogan can also review logs of what Web sites his employees are visiting, at what time, and for how long, not unlike his ability to check phone records.

"Sometimes they're surfing around at lunch time and that's fine," he said, "but in the digital age, everything depends on bandwidth. We need the bandwidth for the IP phones, for work applications, for the security systems ... and if someone is slowing down the network looking at a particular Web site on their lunch break, I have the ability to shut down access to that site and



Abra Degbor, public relations manager for Verizon Wireless, said increasingly, people who work at home or in their vehicles can take advantage of business tools at their fingertips by downloading programs to their cell phones.

better allocate my resources."

The Task is at Hand

And that is all happening as Hogan checks his email, listens to voicemail, watches recorded images of his back park-

ing lot from the night before, sends a fax, and answers a phone call, from his laptop in his Easthampton office ... or in Springfield, or on vacation in Florida.

"It's all about creating all-in-one, unified solutions," Hogan said of today's tech-

nology in general. "With the capabilities we have today, everything you need can be anywhere you are." ♦

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