

The mobile revolution (again)

Handheld devices may be about to fulfil the potential predicted during the tech boom. Peter Parry explains how they are being used for placing orders, finding suppliers and supporting staff on the move.

Do you remember the heady days of the dotcom bubble? Back then, along with the predicted demise of bricks-and-mortar stores as we all bought online, we were told that before long everyone would be using wireless application protocol (Wap) phones to conduct business and make purchases on the move - for example, theatre tickets, bunches of flowers, soft drinks from vending machines - by simply waving our cell phones at them. Not surprisingly, it never happened.

However, long after the hype surrounding mobile commerce (m-commerce) subsided, a quiet revolution is likely to shoot it back into the limelight. The emergence of serious applications for m-commerce, and technical developments that have removed some of the early limitations, mean it is now practical for end-users to place orders while on the move or out in the field. The attractions of this from the professional buyer's point of view are that it makes it easier for end-users to buy from preferred suppliers with which the organisation has formal supply contracts. It also encourages compliance.

So what's new?

Let's start by looking at the new applications in m-commerce. Where they can be usefully applied, they have the potential to transform how organisations operate. In this context, it is possible to see how mobile commerce, as a purchasing initiative can lead directly to improvements in customer service.

A good example is the development of care in the community. The NHS and the government are keen to provide more treatment to patients in their own homes. NHS Supply Chain is operating the new Home Delivery Service, which enables patients and care homes to receive day-to-day medical supplies directly.

Currently nurses and care workers order supplies when they return to their office after visiting the patient. In future, however, it is likely that orders will be placed via a handheld device during the visit. The order can be discussed and agreed with the patient, availability checked and delivery times set there and then. This should make the clinician more productive, and offer a better service to the patient.

In the private sector, mobile devices can speed up repairs of the many items of plant and equipment that require regular on-site servicing, from fork lift trucks to photocopiers to sophisticated medical equipment. In all these cases, service engineers need direct access to parts catalogues and workshop manuals with drawings. In turn, they need to "explode" these diagrams to identify which parts to replace.

For engineers, there are huge benefits from having direct access to comprehensive and fully up-to-date information on parts and servicing. Being able to do this "on the move" and, if necessary, to check availability, identify substitutes and then order new parts from the nearest approved supplier is an even greater advantage.

For the customer these benefits translate into reduced equipment downtime and more efficient repairs. For the buyer, the benefits are likely to be better service to the "internal" customer and greater contract compliance. However, securing them requires careful planning when setting the service specification and awarding the supply contract.

Mobile devices and hardware

With e-procurement it is common for the purchasing organisation to create its own in-house catalogue, but m-commerce is likely to be more attractive if users have access to the supplier's list. The electronic catalogue of maintenance and repair parts supplier RS provides not only a full listing of all its products but also technical data sheets and suggested

alternatives if a part is not in stock. This is the sort of information staff in the field require - and would be prohibitively expensive for most user organisations to include and maintain in their in-house catalogue.

Many of these applications are already available on other systems. But no m-commerce version was on the market because the software, hardware and infrastructure did not exist. But most of these limitations are now substantially resolved.

Not so long ago a mobile phone took voice calls and a personal digital assistant (PDA) was little more than a smart "gizmo" with an electronic diary. The arrival of the Blackberry changed all that.

The development of the PDA is an important "enabler" for m-commerce. Compared with laptop computers, they are small, light, cheap and easy to use (all offer stylus operation) with no "booting up". The constraint is that, while they have the memory to cater for sophisticated programmes, they have far less memory than a laptop. However, specialist software can now overcome this.

The first type is data management software: users of m-commerce need to be able to access and download significant amounts of data and do so quickly. Software supplier Infomill developed its PartsArena Mobile software specifically for downloading information to a PDA. It uses a code that is ideal for use on low-memory devices such as PDAs.

Stock check

Wolseley, which is better known under the names Plumb Centre and Build Centre in the UK and has more than 5,000 outlets worldwide selling plumbing and building supplies, has adopted PartsArena so that plumbers and builders working on-site can access the entire Wolseley catalogue on a PDA. They can check prices and also identify the nearest Wolseley outlet

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with the item in stock. If necessary, they can order materials and pay for them using the PDA.

A second step forward has been infrastructure technology. Cities across the world are racing to set up networks of hotspots that enable businesspeople on the move to connect to the internet.

Wi-Fi is already widely used by companies (91 per cent have installed it or are planning to, according to research company Gartner) and elsewhere. These days, almost every laptop sold is Wi-Fi capable.

The drawback with Wi-Fi is that it can only operate within a relatively short range - up to about 90 metres. Its effectiveness can also be compromised the likes of stone walls, concrete floors and even trees and rain. The new WiMAX technology aims to address some of these shortcomings. It is more suitable for outdoor use, has a range of several miles and can be used in licensed radio spectrum. This means it does not suffer from the interference problems of Wi-Fi and makes it suitable for critical business use.

Where next?

A number of new applications are set for m-commerce. In the business-to-business sphere, the travel industry envisages a future in which we book and pay for travel just using our phones.

With hotel reservations, to take one example, your phone will also become the "key" that opens the door when we arrive outside our bedroom. So does this mean you'll be waving goodbye to the plastic keys that refuse to let you into your room after you have struggled up to the fifteenth floor with all your luggage? Maybe.

Whether some of these predictions will be realised remains to be seen. One thing that we can be sure of is that, for many organisations, m-commerce is set to become a core part of

their strategy to win and retain new business.

As buyers we all need to consider how we and our organisations can benefit from this in terms of providing a better service to our own internal customers working in the field, better contract compliance and, ultimately, better service to our external customers.

Taken from Supply Management magazine, archived article, 2 November 2006