

SOLUTION PROVIDERS MOBILIZE AROUND MOBILITY

Smartphones and tablets are reshaping IT management, security and vertical applications strategies. **BY HEATHER CLANCY**

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ALTHOUGH VERY FEW IT solution providers actually sell smartphones or media tablets, such as Apple's iPad, they can no longer ignore them in their solution development or support policies.

"By the end of the year, people really need a good strategy in place, if not sooner," said David Bennett, president of IT solution provider Connections for Business in Hollywood, Fla. "You need to set your own standards and educate [customers] about the risks. Most companies will prefer to accept those risks in

exchange for the value of innovation," he said.

There is no denying that 2010 has been a game-changing year for mobile technology, despite the global recession. Research firm Gartner Inc. reported record sales for the smartphone category in the third quarter of 2010, with more than 81 million units sold. Those figures include sales for the Research in Motion BlackBerry, the Apple iPhone and various devices based on the fast-growing Google Android platform. Gartner is predicting 30%

TOP FIVE SMARTPHONE VENDORS, 3Q 2010

VENDOR	3Q 2010 UNIT SHIPMENTS	3Q 2009 UNIT SHIPMENTS
1. Nokia	26.5 million	16.4 million
2. Apple	14.1 million	17.4 million
3. RIM	12.4 million	8.5 million
4. Samsung	7.2 million	1.2 million
5. HTC	5.8 million	4.9 million

SOURCE: IDC WORLDWIDE QUARTERLY MOBILE PHONE TRACKER, NOVEMBER 2010

year-over-year growth for the entire year from a unit-sales standpoint.

And the smartphone category could feel pressure in 2011 as more media tablets reach the market, inspired by the success of the iPad. Gartner forecasts that 54.8 million media tablets will be sold next year.

SUPPORT FOR MOBILE DEVICES

The extent to which solution providers plan to support these platforms varies—ranging from full-fledged vertical applications development projects to security policies and solutions for new managed services. As an example, Connections for

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→ SMARTPHONES THAT MATTER

ONE SHOULD NEVER underestimate the power of Microsoft to penetrate a market, but IT solution providers say there are currently three smartphone operating systems that really matter: Research in Motion's BlackBerry, Apple's iPhone (iOS) and the various devices converging around Google's Android. Windows Mobile adoption has lagged, but solution providers say they are watching the Windows Phone 7 launch arc closely.

"Frankly, it's the Wild West right now in terms of which devices to support," said David Bennett, president of solution provider Connections for Business in Hollywood, Fla.

A 2010 survey by Forrester Research Inc. found that nearly half of all companies are supporting two or more mobile application platforms. About the same number support employee-owned devices. Of these, the BlackBerry still is the dominant platform, supported by almost 70% of the companies surveyed by Forrester. That's because it is the most enterprise-ready platform, according to Bennett.

Still, the Forrester research shows that approximately 30% of businesses support the iPhone and 13% now manage Android devices.

"We see all the Apple platforms as appealing, and the Android is gaining momentum fast," said Dave Casey, president of Westron Communications, a network integrator in Frisco, Texas.

One key strength of the Android platform is the fact that these devices are available on multiple wireless networks, say solution providers. The iPhone's historic ties to AT&T have held up faster adoption, they added.

A challenge with both the Android and iPhone operating systems is that they were built with consumer applications in mind, Bennett said. Conversely, the BlackBerry was built with attention to enterprise considerations, including security, user provisioning and device management needs.

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Business has revised its managed services to set specific boundaries around what it can and cannot support when it comes to smartphones and tablets. For now, it is focused on supporting just Exchange Server connections for email, calendars and address books, Bennett said.

"I don't think this position will be appropriate in the future," he said. That's why Bennett said building a

managed services offering that supports multiple mobile devices is a priority from a business development standpoint.

"We are looking for a good management platform that would cover all these platforms. Specifically, we want to take remote control of the device, to push policies out as needed," he said.

"We are not specifically selling

→ TABLET TALES

LET'S PUT THINGS in perspective. Yes, the market for media tablets is exploding, but it has a long way to go before it overtakes traditional portable personal computers.

Market research firm IDC defines media tablets, such as Apple's iPad, as devices with 7-inch to 12-inch color displays that run on lightweight processors and operating systems. It doesn't include full-fledged tablet PCs that are based on 86 processors and full PC operating systems in those projections. Their appeal is similar to those of netbooks: ease of use and wireless Internet connectivity.

Projections from IDC call for 46 million units of so-called media tablets to ship annually by 2014, compared with an anticipated 7.6 million units in 2010. That's still a lot smaller than the market for portable PCs in general: Close to 398 million notebooks and netbooks will ship in 2014, IDC predicts.

But it would be a mistake to ignore the current generation of streamlined media tablets, according to solution providers.

Derek Downs, vice president of advanced collaboration solutions division of network integrator INX Inc. in Houston, said the tablet phenomenon escalated in ways that his company didn't imagine at the beginning of 2010. Healthcare professionals, in particular, are intrigued by potential applications at the point of care, he said.

Many clients are looking at the iPad, in particular, as a tool for helping their executives access the most current information possible in critical boardroom or customer meetings, said Matt Bossom, solutions engineer for Denver-based security VAR Accuvant Inc. The iPad's screen size and its support for AES encryption and WPA2 security protocols over WiFi networks has helped assuage security concerns, Bossom said. "Some of the shift has to do with people going paperless," he said. ■

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iPads and smartphones or writing software for them," said Dave Casey, CEO of Westron Communications, a network integrator in Frisco, Texas. "But we are recommending organizations embrace these interfaces and these apps as we drive sales of all the rest of our unified communications portfolio. We are looking to partner with software developers that will bring unique applications to the platforms that we can present to our user community."

NOT JUST EMAIL

Although smartphones are considered to be primarily communications devices, the larger viewing display afforded by tablets is prompting new sorts of application discussions.

"These tablets will be like desktops in the future. So, I have the same sorts of discussions as I would have with someone considering virtual desktop technology," said Guy Baroan, founder and CEO of Baroan Technologies, a solution provider based in Elmwood Park, N.J.

Many executives are looking to the iPad as a presentation tool, a note-taking alternative and a method of staying connected with records that previously they would carry in paper format, said Matt Bossom, solutions engineer for Denver-based security VAR Accuvant Inc.

The motivation is simple: They can access the latest information possible. Some medical practices are eval-

uating iPad tablets to enable secure remote access to electronic health records, Bossom said.

From a security standpoint, Accuvant recommends the WiFi-only ver-

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sion of the device, not only to block roaming costs but also to ensure that its clients have the strongest possible security and encryption options.

MINDFUL OF COMPLIANCE

Solution providers need to be conscious of the compliance and policy implications associated with supporting tablets and smartphones, said Derek Downs, vice president of advanced collaboration solutions division of network integrator INX Inc. in Houston. "We can support them technically quite easily, but the policy and governance issues are harder to handle," Downs said. "This

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is not a technical decision—this requires business input.”

That’s why, in many cases, it will be the users themselves who manage these devices, not internal IT departments, said Accuvant’s Bossom. That has implications not only for application interface design but also for training. It will also have an impact relating to where solution providers should direct their sales prospects, he said.

“The support is being pushed out right to the very edge,” he said. “The people using the apps need to know how to support them.”

BUILDING SKILLS, THE GRASSROOTS WAY

Another challenge that solution providers face is shelling out the money to get their technical teams up to snuff on all the different devices. These consumer gadgets aren’t exactly covered by traditional channel programs, which means skills development will be an investment.

“This is part of the big clash that is occurring between consumer devices and typical business devices,” said INX’s Downs.

When it comes to application development, Downs said many of the same skills that apply for Java applications programming are applicable for smartphones and tablets based on the Android platforms. That’s one reason Android is gaining

ground, and INX is placing weight on this platform.

“You can’t build any Web-based application now with the expectation

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that it will be viewed from just a desktop or a laptop. You need to make sure it is supported by a range of these devices,” Downs said.

The power of the software development community is also the reason that solution providers should not underestimate the potential cloud of the Windows Phone 7 platform as smartphones and media tablets become just another client computing option in business environments, he said. ■