

GOING MOBILE IN THE WIRELESS REVOLUTION

It is suggested that you refer to the Knowledgebase article on Wireless Networks for an explanation of how *wireless* networks work and the current standards.

WiFi - why not?

Although a laptop is inherently mobile the key to true mobile working is the ability to be able to connect to shared resources - be they your organisation's documents, an email account or the web. Many laptops now come with built-in wireless LAN cards, using an IEEE 802.11g standard, more commonly known as WiFi. The cool image is that with a WiFi laptop you stroll into a coffee shop, fire up your machine, open your network connections, let the software "sniff" the airwaves and you're instantly connected to the world. Is it that simple? Well, judging by articles written on the subject, yes and no. ZDNet UK took a WiFi tour of London and found varying levels of service and, more importantly, awareness of the existence of WiFi in their premises.

Assuming you already have a laptop with WiFi capability, the next thing you'll need to do is to sign up for a service - and here's the first level of potential confusion. There are a number of service providers - examples are T-Mobile, BT Openzone, Surf and Sip, Boingo and Broadscope. If you are an occasional user and move about a bit then you might just want to sign up as and when you use the service - but this is more expensive. If however you're only going to be using it in your coffee house of choice then a plan could be cheaper in the long run. Costs vary but range

from £5.50 per hour, £15 for unlimited access for a day and £47 for a month. You pay by credit or debit card over secure connections.

How do you know if somewhere is WiFi equipped? Some places will have stickers in the window, others have leaflets on the tables. The sticker displayed will tell you who's providing the service - Starbucks use T-Mobile, Café Nero use Boingo Wireless and Costa are with BT Openzone. And of course it's not just coffee shops that are wireless enabled - pubs, airports and train stations, hotels and conference venues are all catching the bug (serious WiFi-ers take notes as they listen to presentations and have them up on their websites virtually live) - even Brighton beach! Virgin Trains and GNER are planning for WiFi access on their trains by 2004 and no doubt the airlines won't be far behind.

Alternatives :

Tablets

You don't necessarily need to lug a laptop around in order to take advantage of WiFi technology.

A new kid on the block is the tablet PC - although these are just as large as laptops usually.

Tablet PCs resemble laptops and can be used as traditional laptop manner using a keyboard - they convert into a tablet by swivelling the screen round. Manufacturers of tablets include Toshiba, Acer and HP. With a tablet you can write directly on the screen using a special stylus and the *software* interprets your handwriting. This is useful for folks who have to make notes on the job and don't want the additional hassle of transferring from paper to computer.

Although the market for tablets is small at present and seems to be slow in taking off, these devices have found favour in areas like health.

Netbooks

Significantly smaller and cheaper than a conventional laptop, Netbooks are ideal for web and email on the move and are becoming very popular.

PDA's

More compact are personal digital assistants - PDA's - sometimes known as handheld computers. PDA's have come a long way from the personal organisers of yore and now sport colour displays, email applications, games, cameras, you name it. And, of course, WiFi capability on selected devices. Palm, Toshiba, Dell, HP and Sony are just some of the manufacturers to add WiFi cards to their PDA's although you won't see much change out of £300 if you want to be able to browse the web wirelessly. You'll also not be able to see very much as the largest screens are around three and half inches across and you're probably not going to want to type up that report on a keyboard that's two inches across. But for checking email, getting some travel news, seeing how much your share prices have fallen without the size, weight and value of a laptop in addition to diary, contacts and tasks then they might just be the thing for you.

Mobile phones

The buzz word some time ago was convergence - you get everything you could ever want on one device. So now you have PDA's which are also phones, phones which are also PDA's, and phones which are cameras, *MP3* players and video players. Whether this is desirable or not depends on your attitude to gadgets - and the size of your wallet. As yet many phones don't yet have WiFi capability - you're limited to GPRS and Bluetooth. However this is changing and more 3G (third generation) mobile phones are available with WiFi capability.

Mobile Broadband

For around £15 per month and a one off cost of around £25, most of the mobile phone networks now have 3G devices that can be plugged into a USB port on a laptop for broadband access anywhere there is *network* coverage.

Heaven or hell?

So does mobility lead to a utopian way of working? Apart from developing a serious caffeine addiction if you only ever work in coffee shops, an obvious issue is theft - the market for stolen laptops, phone and PDAs is booming as never before. Do you really want to be carrying around a mobile phone worth hundreds of pounds? Is it really wise to be using that laptop in a tube train? Besides from being careful, sensible precautions to take include buying insurance and taking regular back-ups - see the Knowledgebase article [Safe and sound - keeping your computers and data secure](#).

Unless you have an ultra-portable laptop they can still be quite heavy to cart around all day - and those laptop bags just shout "steal me!"

Remember that batteries don't last forever and spares can be expensive and add to your burden. Battery life will diminish fast if you have the screen brightness set high in an attempt to counteract bright sunshine which can make them downright impossible to view.

Also, as the ZDNet WiFi London review reported, the connection in Starbucks might not be working...

Work life balance is becoming increasingly important to a number of people and technology can help here by introducing the concept of mobile and also remote working - either from home or in specially built telework centres - this is covered in Knowledgebase article [Home Sweet Home](#).

The thought of not having to commute every day is appealing to a lot of people. But these innovations can also have downsides - some employers will take the view that because you **can** be connected at all times, that you also **want** to be. This might not be the case - and can put unnecessary stress on the individual. If you never manage to make it into the office how do you engage with your colleagues? The water-cooler moments just don't happen - along with the informal interaction that can lead to sparking new ideas.

Source: <http://www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk/wirelessrevolution>