

CONTEMPLATING “MOBILITY”



With time to kill at Syracuse and Cleveland airports (as I travel to Interop in Las Vegas), I find myself ruminating on a topic that I’ll be talking about in a workshop in a couple of days: *mobility*. As with terms like “convergence” and “unified”, the notion of mobility often finds itself in a fuzzy place, meaning different things to different people and providers.

Here’s my at-the-airport-with-time-to-kill take on mobility, which I will define here as connectivity to at least the Internet as your location changes. We’ll let it go at that for this exercise, knowing that many of us need access back to our corporate networks as well.

- **Mobility is as much a culture as it is a technical deliverable**
- **Clients and client devices are the forces that drive the cosmic mobility engine**
- **Apps are reason mobility is desired**
- **No one solution from any carrier or WLAN vendor provides mobility by itself**

Let's consider these

Mobility is in the mind of the beholder. To one person, wandering the planet scrounging for free and open Wi-Fi networks as an alternative to blasting through their pricey data plan equals mobility. Even though there is a definite start/stop/discover/try/fail/try again cycle to this activity, the same device eventually gets them to the Internet as they wander, one way or another, and so they are “mobile” in their minds. To other folks that work from their mobile devices, putting up with the rigors of this example would be a travesty. To the hyper-connected, mobility means getting connected the same way everywhere and anywhere with little tolerance for having to worry about the network underneath. Both have common elements of getting connected in lots of places.

Client device implications on mobility. How mobile a client can be is determined by the capabilities of the client device, and perhaps how fat the wallet is in the pocket of the human using that device when it comes to for-fee access.

An iPod Touch has different native mobility capabilities than does a Samsung Galaxy smartphone. The Touch is screwed without a Wi-Fi network nearby, where the Galaxy is “mobile” in Wi-Fi cells plus anywhere it’s subscription is allowed to go in the mobile carrier’s network. Where there is no Wi-Fi or 3G/4G network, even this slick multi-tech device is no longer “mobile”. In those between-times where any device has no connectivity for lack of signal or paid entry to new networks, the devices are portable but certainly not “mobile”.

Apps are king. Beyond the Verizon guy on the commercial who roams around chanting “can you hear me know?”, very few of us are interested in connectivity for it’s own sake. Typically we want to, you know, *do things* with our connection. Whether it be email, chat, productivity apps, retail-oriented data gathering, mapping, or whatever- apps are why we have the need for mobility. Sure, a discarded smart phone can play Angry Birds and connect to Wi-Fi, but given the lack of contiguous coast-to-coast Wi-Fi that device is pretty limited in it’s mobility paradigm. Obviously not all apps enable or require mobility, but without the apps that do, mobility dries up.

The Networks- Wi-Fi and Mobile Carriers. I get a bit confused by WLAN vendors that claim to sell mobility. Does this mean if I buy that system, my new Wi-Fi provider will broker my in-flight Go-Go connection and pay the session fee when I’m away from my office WLAN and above the service area of Verizon and

AT&T? Pfffft, That WLAN vendor might provide a smokin' WLAN at each of my corporate locations, but they are not on the cell towers between those locations. So inside my borders I guess they provide mobility, but that's really taking liberties with the concept.

The 3G/4G providers of the world certainly go further towards delivering large-scale, endless mobility. But they also have their limits as evidenced by a booming small cell market that seeks to fill in where the big carriers come up short. And despite the impressive thumbnail coverage maps touted on TV commercials, there are still plenty of places where you just can't get mobile signal.

Wi-Fi and mobile carriers compliment each other. Though the relationship is often complicated between the two technologies, it tends to be more symbiotic than adversarial and both are critical to Big Mobility.

And so we come to the point (if you can call it that- remember, I'm really just killing time here). No one player on the mobility stage can carry the show. WLAN vendors don't sell mobility. Client devices are worthless without good networks. Apps drive the need for mobility but need good devices and networks to have value, and even big networks like AT&T and Verizon have their limits. Everyone needs each other in this mix for mobility to work.

And since mobility is exploding in the business world, sound policy, design, and administration are still as relevant as they ever were on the corporate LAN (more so, actually, as the network is extended far beyond our physical borders).

Mobility is a big topic. It's nuanced. It means different things to each of us, while still having common building blocks and concerns. When someone offers you a mobility solution, it could mean a lot of things- you need to zero in on what mobility means to you, because we each have our own mobility story.

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