

Businesses with the world in their pocket

The internet and email revolutionised the way we do business. Now East Anglian firms are investing in technology which allows them to access their files at any time, anywhere in the world. **SAM WILLIAMS** reports.

A decade ago, a business inquiry about a new service would have begun with a letter, followed by a telephone call and finally, perhaps a week later, a face-to-face appointment.

Today that process has been replaced with a simple email – and rather than a week many clients now expect a same-day response.

However, as well as generating demand for a swift answer, technology also offers a possible solution, with remote working systems enabling staff to access their computer files and programmes, emails and voicemail messages around the clock and from anywhere in the world.

Peter Davies, chairman of Norwich IT company Breakwater IT, said demand for remote working technology was “growing enormously” in and around the city.

As well as using email-capable phones, such as iPhones and Blackberries, to check and respond to messages on the move, Mr Davies said many businesses were now using mobile internet technology to access their work computer systems while travelling, at client meetings or at home.

And in addition to email, bosses and staff are able to access and use word processing, spreadsheet, database and other more complicated applications using a personal digital assistant, Blackberry or laptop.

He said: “It started out with businesses wanting to access information from home via a virtual private network internet link and have their office desktop at home.

“Now people increasingly want to see that on the move.

“Three years ago there were fairly few managing directors or senior directors using the remote working technology but increasingly the whole management team is looking to see their information while on the move.

“The future is all about expectations of information and access of information.

“Think of a scenario not that long ago in which a customer would have written to their clients and expected to have an appointment in a week or 10 days. Now they expect a response much more quickly.

“This technology allows you to respond a lot quicker.”

Mr Davies said mobile working technology was proving popular with professional services firms such as

accountants, lawyers and chartered surveyors, but also in the offshore energy sector.

The company has recently delivered a contract with Great Yarmouth-based Seajacks, which provides self-propelled jack-up platforms.

The work by Breakwater IT involved supporting fast broadband connections with vessels in the middle of the North Sea through satellites.

And Mr Davies said with companies downloading and sending larger and larger files and documents, broadband capacity was only going to increase – which would improve the viability of services such as video conferencing, in which live video links stream images and audio across the globe in real time using fast internet links.

He added: “Video conferencing has been slow to develop, but now it is starting to gain momentum.

We have clients who work in Spain and Norfolk and want a video conference link in their phones.

“With all that’s happened with higher travel

costs, the disruption and the environmental impact of flying, video conferencing is going to be really big in the next few years.”

One company which has invested in remote working technology through Breakwater

IT is M

and A Partners, an accountancy firm based in The Close in Norwich.

Jeremy Robson, operations director, said the company used a document management system called INVU, which allows partners to access all Word and Excel files and email from anywhere.

“Our staff have all got laptops so while they are sitting with clients, at home or at work, at the click of a button they can access all their information and what they are doing,” he said. “They can pull up clients’ accounts and tax details.

“It is called a paperless office but inevitably there is some paper involved, but it means people can work from home, or they can go to see a client and power up their laptop and access the information.

“It means you never forget anything. It is massively useful.”

As well as the convenience, Mr Robson said the technology offered benefits in productivity and offering a better service, adding: “It allows you to move things on much quicker.

“If you are a partner working at home at 10pm and you see a message you weren’t able to respond to in the day requesting information, normally you would have to wait until the next day to respond to that.

“With this technology it means you are able to respond that much more quickly.

TIP OF THE ICEBERG: Jeremy Robson, below, operations director of M&A Partners in Norwich, and Peter Davies, left, chairman of Breakwater IT, say demand for remote technology is growing, and today’s technology is only scratching the surface as to what is possible.



“Over the past two or three years one thing we have seen is email traffic has dramatically increased. Three to four years ago it was mostly letters, but now its all emails.

“By the very nature of email, clients expect a much quicker response. To be able to do that at home with a glass of wine in your hand in the evening is great.

“The amazing thing is we are only scratching the surface. There is so much more than can be done.”



A BUSINESS LINK GUIDE TO MOBILE TECHNOLOGY

What is mobile technology?

Mobile technology is exactly what the name implies – technology that is portable. Examples of mobile IT devices include:

- laptop and netbook computers
- palmtop computers or personal digital assistants
- mobile phones and smart phones

Mobile devices can be enabled to use a variety of communications technologies such as:

- wireless fidelity (WiFi) – a type of wireless local area network technology
- Bluetooth – connects mobile devices wirelessly
- ‘third generation’ (3G), global system for mobile communications

(GSM) and general packet radio service (GPRS) data services – data networking services for mobile phones

- dial-up services – data networking services using modems and telephone lines
- virtual private networks – secure access to a private network

It is therefore possible to network the mobile device to a home office or the internet while travelling.

What are the benefits?

Mobile computing can improve the service you offer your customers. For example, when meeting with customers you could access your customer relationship management

system – over the internet – allowing you to update customer details while away from the office.

Alternatively, you can enable customers to pay for services or goods without having to go to the till. For example, by using a wireless payment terminal diners can pay for their meal without leaving their table. More powerful solutions can link you directly into the office network while working off site, for instance to access your database or accounting systems. This leads to great flexibility in working – for example, enabling home working, or working while travelling. Increasingly, networking ‘hot spots’ are being provided in public areas that allow connection back to the office

network or the internet.

The growth has also impacted positively on the use of mobile devices, supporting more flexible working practices by providing services over the internet.

Drawbacks

There are costs involved in setting up the equipment and training required to make use of mobile devices. Mobile IT devices can expose valuable data to unauthorised people if the proper precautions are not taken to ensure that the devices, and the data they can access, are kept safe.

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