Best for Business

Businessmen often want to know what mobile devices are best for their business. As with all things IT, there is no simple answer, as it always depends on the individual business' existing systems and requirements. Jason Connolly, director of Next Generation IT, looks to cast some light on the plethora of mobile devices available.

Battle of the smartphones

The race to be the market leader has raged on between Microsoft and Blackberry for some years now, but latterly a new entrant, Apple's iPhone has dominated. Then came Google's Android which is catching up fast; a new version of the Windows smartphone and a partnership with Nokia; plus the acquisition of Palm by HP (to gain access to the excellent Palm OS for the new range of HP mobile devices). But which is best for business?

For business, Blackberry has been traditionally strong, and is by far the most widely used. Blackberries are excellent for e-mail on the move, are physically robust, can integrate seamlessly with the Microsoft Exchange system and boasts bulletproof software. Research in Motion pioneered the smartphone marketplace with the Blackberry in 1999, and have led this market ever since. The latest Blackberry devices are more stylish than the early brick-shaped devices, and can handle multimedia capably (although not as well as the all-conquering iPhone), whilst still providing the best security.

The battle intensified when Apple entered the fray in 2007 with the iPhone, providing unprecedented ease of use and oozing style. The immediate success of the coveted iPhone was decisive and redefined the mobile smartphone marketplace. The iPhone provides similar push e-mail functionality, but a far better experience for web browsing, multimedia and gaming. An object of desire, the iPhone's key advantage is its integration with the iTunes Appstore, giving access to thousands of 'apps', and the ability to easily download music, video, podcasts and eBooks.

Google took a different approach providing a Linux-based open-source operating system called 'Android' for other manufacturers to use. The system was initially clunky, but with its 4th generation system about to be launched (codenamed 'Ice-cream Sandwich'), the polished Android system has been widely adopted by many manufacturers, notably Korean manufacturer HTC, but also by Samsung, Motorola, Sony, LG and Acer. Initially Android was the favoured weapon of 'tech heads' who forgave its rough edges, but the latest version is now more refined and a real contender for iPhone's style crown.

Only history will tell who will be the victor, but with the recent release of Windows Phone 7 and talk of an iPhone 5 on the horizon, this battle may rage on for many years.

A serious security risk?

From an IT standpoint, one key issue to consider is that to securely connect these handsets to your e-mail server, generally you will need a 'gateway server' through which these devices to connect. Helpfully, Blackberry provides the Blackberry Enterprise Server software free of charge with their system. For all the other handsets, you will generally require a Windows Threat Management Server (TMG) to securely connect the handsets to your e-mail server. The added advantage of the TMG server is that it also provides access to your e-mails from any internet connected PC.

The emergence of tablets and netbooks

Highly-portable laptop computers and their ultra-portable netbook/tablet brothers are becoming ever more popular for mobile computing. Indeed in 2009, laptops outsold desktop computers for the first time ever. This trend is set to continue with thinner screens, lower power processors and solid state 'flash' storage driving even greater portability in the notebook/netbook market.

From an IT perspective, the added advantage of the devices over smartphones is that their Windows operating systems make them easier to integrate with the back office systems, and provide a larger screen and keyboard for more serious word processing.

Here to help

Your IT partner can assist you with choosing the most appropriate solution for your business, and help you put in place the necessary systems to link in with your office's servers. Of course maintaining the security of your data, and integrity of your network is a key consideration, but also bear in mind the cost of any mobile data roaming charges. You may also need to discuss where you need to gain access to your systems, and put in place specialist systems to enable that access, for instance at wi-fi hotspots, or internet cafés.

The future

Where will the future lead us? There will definitely be further convergence between smartphones, tables and netbooks. There will continue to develop more new and exciting applications for mobile technology, for instance using the smartphone to make credit card payments in store.

Connection speeds will continue to increase, making portable devices more practical to use, and giving an experience more akin to working in the office. Mobile streaming of television and films will also become a reality when 4G connectivity arrives.

The manufacturers will continue to explore further form factors, for example wearable smartphone-watches. At the moment the main limitation is the battery size and weight, but several manufacturers are working on fuel cell batteries. Imagine recharging your mobile phone by topping up your fuel cells with a few drops of bottled water!