

“Tethered or Unfettered: Wireless Makes Significant Gains—And a Few Setbacks”

Step into Starbucks next time, and you're likely to see coffeehouse goers enjoying a latte while gazing starry-eyed at their laptop screen. Sans the newspaper, they'll be pouring over the latest news headlines via their browser thanks in part to a growing contingency of Wi-Fi hotspots that appear to be exploding throughout the metro populace these days. Even libraries are no longer sacred hallowed halls of printed books and literature; welcome to the ubiquitous Internet made possible by wireless advances in cost and performance. But despite all of the hype for sprawling access points, the launch of employee mobility is still getting started in its purest infancy.

Employer organizations that made the dash to embrace two-way paging and PCS services for their virtual workforce are once again leading the race to further connect employees—24/7 and without geographical boundaries. Previously guarded companies like IBM are consciously turning to wireless and IP telephony solutions as the answer to many connectivity demands. Even government, in its lesser-innovative state of existence, has begun to appreciate customer service aspects afforded by wireless services. Take the highway transportation update system that now spans most of the United States' major arteries. One call or click seems to bring clarity to the morning commute. And not just telematics, PDAs and wireless voice are gaining strides with features that leave one asking: how much connectivity is enough?

Until recently, labor economists never really had a strong sense of perspective when it came to the impact of Internet technologies, partly because of sheer time intervals but mostly because of rudimentary data. Sure, the visceral notion was that the Internet made life more productive in the context of work and certainly enrichment in personal knowledge utility. But as disparate sources of data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics point out today, employees that use the Internet as a core resource to performing knowledge tasks find little or non-existent change in total work output. That means pre-1995, when the mass population came into contact with Internet technologies, the preceding era was just as productive despite the infusion of an always-on source of information. Fast-forward to 2003, and the first signs of measuring wireless utility point to an evolving state of *cognitive dissonance*, a term used to the label competing noise of an info-glut situation.

This sudden reality of information overload is nothing alarming, but shadowed against the backdrop of GDP output that determines American productivity, the results are disfavoring of wireless in the broad sense. Although we can place and receive calls throughout 83% of the geographical United States, those calls are reflected in longer commute times on highways and surface transportation. Customers still have questions when transacting with businesses. And distance learning has quite achieved replacement of the traditional classroom. In most senses of advanced mobility, citizens of the Information Age can move faster and with greater agility than ever before. However, productivity is still waiting for a boost on a per-employee basis.

CTIA in New Orleans delivered fabulously on the promise of vendors achieving milestones in terms of extending wireless capabilities. Whether you consider the personal exploit of SMS or enhanced Web browsing to be vital to the enterprise, the jury verdict is still out for debate. Given the expansion of wireless infrastructure, and its steep acceleration into the public community, more and more people will be connecting to the Net in places never

thought possible. Airplanes, coffeehouses, sports arenas—transformed overnight into the next level of commerce and information access. But for many, the desire for unleashed access may not deliver on the goods of real productivity. And during times of economic uncertainty, the enterprise need only be concerned with investing in the sure thing.

