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Wireless Carriers Focus On Line-Of-Business Apps

Wireless carriers are increasing data transfer speeds, making data-intensive mobile applications more feasible.

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One of the first things companies discover when implementing mobile solutions for their workforces is that there are three key parts to consider: the hardware, the software, and the network. Every component works with and influences the other — they must, or your solution will fail. The available wireless network will influence your hardware decision, the hardware might limit the software choices, and so on. The network, which might have seemed a necessary but nondynamic component of a mobile solution, is moving to the forefront in the wireless equation. Wireless data carriers are aligning their offerings with the business needs of enterprises, and I'm not talking about e-mail. Line-of-business applications (i.e. solutions enabling core business processes in the field) are an area of growth for carriers, which means you can more easily deploy a mobile solution.

LINE-OF-BUSINESS APPS PROVIDE BIGGEST PAYBACKS

Though mobile e-mail solutions might be perceived as being the most prominent mobile solutions on carriers' agendas, line-of-business applications, such as field service, make up a hefty share. This is because these applications provide the most quantifiable benefits to end user companies, making them easier for carriers to sell. For instance, the July 2006 issue of *Integrated Solutions* featured a story on Tennant Company's field service deployment, which saved the company \$600,000 in data entry labor costs. Or, consider the feature story in our May 2006 issue about General Binding Corp., whose field service network upgrade reduced the company's telecommunication costs 40%. As an Accenture/Cingular Wireless white paper states, "The key to adding real-time wireless mobility is not killer apps, but rather killer business processes. It is in key business processes that mobile applications create fundamental value."

Most end user companies are viewing wireless solutions as essential components of effective work processes — they're using technology to replace processes that already exist. For example, a field service company might replace paper tablets, pens, and manual data entry with a mobile computing solution involving electronic forms and wireless communication with back end systems. Advanced companies will approach mobile projects from a business process reengineering standpoint, looking for inefficiencies in their processes and using wireless to help streamline, and thus improve, the processes. In this case, a field service company might realize that its techs are operating inefficiently because their routes are not optimized and there is no visibility as to the techs' locations. The company could implement a field service scheduling and optimization solution that takes into account techs' schedules, skills, and locations and assigns jobs automatically. This approach changes the business process and creates immediate efficiency.

CARRIERS INVESTING IN WIRELESS ENTERPRISE, VERTICAL SOLUTIONS

Carriers are recognizing the value of business solutions. The major U.S. wireless data carriers (Cingular, Sprint Nextel, and Verizon Wireless) all offer line-of-business data solutions categorized by vertical market (e.g. transportation, utilities, field service, insurance). In fact, carriers are organizing their internal sales teams based on those vertical markets to ensure the sales reps can truly appreciate customers' needs. Carriers are becoming a new distribution channel, and like the traditional resellers and systems integrators, can offer packaged deals through partnerships with software and hardware providers. Or, the carriers can offer their own development teams (or the development team of a partner) to help create a custom application.

WIRELESS 3.5G NETWORKS PROMISE WIRELESS BROADBAND SPEEDS

The network is, after all, the backbone of your solution, and the speed at which the network transmits information determines the speed of your mobile workforce. The 3G GPRS (general packet radio service)- and CDMA (code division multiple access)-based networks the carriers

Strive For More Functionality From A Field Service Solution

If you're going to invest in a mobile solution for a line-of-business need such as field service management or route delivery tracking, you should make the most of the solution. In other words, don't get the basic send-and-receive information. That's what almost every company will be doing, and you won't have a competitive edge for very long — if you even do to begin with. "Companies implementing a mobile workforce solution should try to implement one that provides as much information as possible to field workers," says Victoria Satran, VP of marketing for MWA Intelligence, whose solution closes 1 million field service calls per day. "In addition to electronic work orders, give mobile workers access to manuals and parts lists. Enable them to input mileage and time worked. Then, integrate the field service solution with back end systems, so all that information gets input into your inventory management and accounting systems."

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operate can transmit data at speeds in excess of 130 Kbps (kilobits per second). Cingular's EDGE (enhanced data rates for global evolution) and Sprint Nextel's EV-DO (evolution data-optimized) networks are being supplemented/upgraded by 3.5G networks, HSDPA (high-speed downlink packet access) and RevA, respectively. These networks boast speeds of anywhere from 400 Kbps to several Mbps (megabits per second). "The enhancement of next-generation wireless networks gives companies the opportunity to extend even more of their critical business processes to the field wirelessly because the networks can accommodate much higher bandwidth- and data-intensive applications," says Laura Johnson, senior director of enterprise solutions for Cingular Wireless. For example, a utility worker can quickly download detailed topographical drawings that plot out locations of underground water mains or natural gas lines. Or, field service workers who repair complex electronics can access complex schematics or even videos of repair procedures. All of these capabilities increase the service provided and decrease the time spent on the call, which benefits your bottom line.

CARRIERS TO PROVIDE MORE LBS/GPS OFFERINGS

A feature that can add to mobile solutions' functionality is GPS (global positioning system)-based applications or LBS (location-based services). By integrating LBS with dispatching and routing systems, you can further optimize your field service solution. GPS technology is based on the triangulation of specific military satellites with a GPS receiver. Carriers are offering the same type of location capabilities, but through their own networks and with cellular towers rather than satellites providing the triangulation. "If you look at the categories of applications companies are deploying today, I'd say GPS/LBS is number one," says Butch Musselman, VP of industry business solutions at Sprint Nextel. "Companies want to know where their workers and assets are so they can be effectively dispatched. It's all because of the competitive environments these service and transportation companies are in. The more information you have about your workforce, the better you can operate."

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