Scott Stonham discusses how Generation Y, those born in the 1980s or 1990s who have grown up with mobile technology and the internet, and are now the driving force behind innovation in these industries. They will demand more socially oriented real-time communication systems that balance work and life

Does the 4G killer app already exist?

Scott Stonham: mobile operators must be able to provide high-quality accessible services that address the complete communication needs of business users

According to Google Trends, the quest for the killer app peaked around the middle of 2001, in line with the growing expectations of 3G network rollouts. Since then, beyond voice services and SMS, the notion of a single killer app has been pretty much debunked, favouring instead the broader, more open approach to network utilisation and revenue generation of app stores.

However, as the 4G epoch approaches, it is interesting to note that the industry is, once again, in search for this most elusive of holy grails.

In February 2010 TeliaSonera announced the launch of its 4G network, with Sprint and Verizon among others bringing 4G networks online during 2010. While commenting on the lack of 4G handsets for 2010, a number of analysts and industry experts have again begun to raise the question about what role of 4G actually is, and whether there is a 4G killer app.

Looking back into the not-too-distant history of mobile telecoms, we see that not only is there no single killer app, but those apps that are successful are not just invented, they are born.

Often much more than just an app, these phenomena are the product of both invention and availability of an environment in which to grow. They are a culmination of various influences, ideas and capabilities, often born before their time, when one or more of the external dependencies is too immature to support it.

The app store, for example, is not a new concept by any means, but working with the mobile operators, Apple created the environment in which it could not just be born, but it could prosper and grow; ultimately changing how the mobile industry views itself.

To identify what might be successful in the impending new world of 4G, we should focus less on the relentless search for the next great idea, and take a retrospective look at what business models, applications, services and concepts now have the right environment in which to prosper.

We should consider not just what is being conceived today specifically for 4G, but to look for those ideas that have been waiting to happen, but lacked certain capabilities that will now be available with 4G networks.

We should also take into consideration trends from wider aspects of the marketplace; in particular, developments and trends in technology and market conditions within the telecoms sector, alongside other market influences such as the general consumer and business market conditions, financial market factors, changes in socio-demographics, competitive pressure within both the telecoms industry and adjacent industries, to highlight just a few.

Coinciding with 4G network availability, today we see significant changes in both market requirements and the technology available to the market to deliver against those requirements.

From the technology perspective, the growth of smartphone penetration is at record levels. With more vendors introducing smartphone models into the mid-tier device market, we are seeing the average level of mobile technology increase across the board, including the used, or "grey" device marketplace as older handsets are passed down to colleagues, friends and family.

Generation Y

Much of this advanced handset technology is being adopted by Generation Y, those born in the 1980s or 1990s who have grown up with mobile technology and the internet, and are now the driving force behind innovation in these industries.

As Gen Y take their roles in businesses within the booming small-medium-business sector, industry is realising that their requirements differ significantly from prior generations, with much more emphasis on mobility, social interaction and an always-connected lifestyle.

The influence of Gen Y on the workplace is already widespread, as their social networking, communication and social-life habits bleed into business practices.

So we find ourselves at another defining juxtaposition of three converging trends — Generation Y demanding always-connected, social rich applications to fit their work within their life, rapidly increasing mobile device sophistication, and faster, lower latency network capabilities.

Through the coming years, Gen Y will take firmer control of the workplace, pushing out the older generation's working practices in favour for more socially oriented, work-life balancing, real-time communication systems.

We see this already today — as the workplace becomes less about desks, booths and offices, and more about flexible working, telecommuting, wireless broadband access to office systems and the coffee shop meeting room.

Today Gen Y are entering the workplace and disrupting the status quo as they go, but tomorrow, Gen Y will be the workplace. The challenge for mobile operators is to build relationships, trust and the dependence of the new workforce on them and their services, giving the new workforce the tools they need to truly revolutionise business environments, making mobility they key requirement for office productivity solutions.

Gen Y has already mobilised the office beyond recognition, but the mobile office is more than a BlackBerry and a laptop on caffeine-fuelled wifi. The mobile office is a seamless extension and connection to the workplace, including systems, documents, people and facilities. The new mobile office environment must cater for this, and small businesses find themselves at the cutting edge of this workplace evolution.

Compelling packages

Today mobile operators have scrambled to put compelling packages and services in place to deliver mobility solutions to both enterprises and SMBs.

In the past year, as the focus swung more towards acquiring and serving the needs of the SMB customer, the mobile operators have found greater competition with the fixed-line operators that currently boast the greater market share of SMB users, and have needed to find a value beyond shared minute plans. Mobile operators must look for real differentiators including high definition voice, and solutions that unify business systems and process across mobile phones and mobile enabled computing, such as mobile broadband equipped netbooks.

They need to compete against IP telephony and messaging providers with turnkey, single package, low cost solutions with the quality and reliability that only they can deliver.

It is not enough to think that 4G in itself will revolutionise the mobile operator's position in the SMB market, but it will provide a levelling factor that makes it easier for them to compete.

Combining 4G with other mobile network characteristics into an easy to sell package suitable for SMB budgets will be key in winning customers away from fixed-line operators. With the rocketing penetration of powerful smartphones, mobile operators are well positioned to take advantage of the new mobile workplace requirements.

Going beyond mobile email, it is now possible to deliver a much richer, more complete and always connected mobile office experience tailored to the expectations of the new generation business user.

To reach the small business user masses, operators must leverage their well-tested commodity-driven distribution model of consumer sales through their high-street retail stores, creating small business points-of-sale, with small business specialists. The solutions need to be flexible enough to cater for the widest variety of vertical business sectors, from medical and legal professionals, to construction, to media and beyond, but still be quick and easy to sell.

Business productivity

With an estimated 60% of consumer tariffs in use today in the UK being used primarily for business within the small business sector, reaching these users seems to be relatively trivial.

However, while massively dependent on their mobile for all aspects of their life, the new generation business user today typically does not think of their mobile operator first when it comes to business productivity solutions.

The challenge for mobile operators is to gain the mind share of these users, offering solutions above and beyond those available from their existing providers with a risk-free, easy-to-manage package that is simple enough to be sold in five minutes by a 16-year-old part-time sales assistant in the retail store.

A fundamental element of the mobile operators' differentiation must be to provide higher quality, more accessible services that address the complete communication needs of the business, whether that is while they are mobile and on-site with a customer, or catching up on emails and documentation in a hotel lobby — all of this at affordable prices.

These users aren't looking for piecemeal or complicated enterprise solutions; they are looking for simple solutions that help them balance their lives between work and everything else.

As such, the mobile operator needs to provide complete, yet simple, hosted office product offerings that include mobile devices, mobile broadband enabled netbooks or laptops, with reliable, high speed network access, business applications and dedicated customer support. MobileOffice from CommuniGate Systems enables the mobile operators to do just this.

MobileOffice is a complete unified communications platform designed to enable mobile operators to support the special communication needs of their small business subscribers across both mobile and desktop devices.

Engineered from the ground up to make it possible for operators to deliver commercially viable business productivity services to hundreds and thousands of individual businesses, no matter what their size, MobileOffice is a powerful multi-tenant software-as-a-service platform for the mobile operator environment.

As the discussion continues around the 4G killer app, mobile operators should act now to capitalise on the burgeoning demand across all sectors of enterprise, especially the SMB, for always connected, mobile productivity tools.

With MobileOffice, mobile operators can deliver simple hosted total communications solutions that provide carrier grade HD Voice, high-fidelity telephony with mobile and desktop access to emails, instant messaging, calendars, contacts, files and much more; essentially everything needed to cost-effectively maximise the acquisition of business subscribers. ■

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