

Wireless: a traveller's friend

Wireless technology has made remote working a more flexible and efficient reality, but firms need to make sure the benefits outweigh the financial and security costs before they dive in

Candice Goodwin, *Best Practice* 27 Mar 2006

Accountants who once might have travelled to the office carrying nothing more hi-tech than a briefcase are now more likely to be toting a laptop, PDA or Blackberry. Growing use of wireless networking means it's much easier for accountants to visit clients, work at their premises and have better access to client information wherever they are.

But smaller firms with largely local clients need to consider whether the benefits of mobile technology outweigh issues like cost and security.

For small and large firms alike, there are three main benefits to be had from mobility. The first, and most obvious, is improved productivity for mobile workers, who can read and send emails, and access important data while they're travelling or at a client's office.

'Our audit people are often offsite for weeks at a time. It's important that they can access email while they're away and that any client documents they create are filed securely in our central systems,' says Ian Singer, IT partner at accountancy firm CLB Littlejohn Frazer.

Around 100 of the firm's accountancy professionals have their own laptop that they can use to connect to the firm's systems when they are out and about. In addition, the firm has given Blackberry smartphones to around 40 partners and senior managers, enabling them to send and receive emails when they are out of the office.

A second advantage of mobile technology is the potential for flexible working, including home working. This can have big benefits in terms of recruitment, staff satisfaction and staff retention, since happy employees are more likely to stay with the firm for longer.

'The impact of allowing employees to work flexibly is quite significant, because it shows an element of trust and gives them more autonomy,' says Nic Sale from occupational psychology firm Pearn Kandola. 'For high-flyer graduates, flexible working is at the top of their wish list when choosing an employer. For existing employees, the benefits include an increase in discretionary effort. In fact, people often work a bit too hard when they're working from home.'

Not everyone takes the mobile office as seriously as Neil Cole, partner and managing director of Devon-based firm Stephen R Long & Co. The firm is currently trialling a web-based intranet system, and Cole looks forward to being able to log in while on holiday to check the firm's fee income.

He predicts that homeworking and flexible working is going to be 'important for the future' and says 'it makes sense for us to have a system that people can use wherever they are'.

Third, and most interestingly for small firms, mobile technology can improve customer satisfaction, enabling a practice to stand out from the competition. Blackpool-based firm Danbro employs nine accountants and has many clients who are IT contractors. Moving from office to office and living away from home for long periods is part of a contractor's way of life.

'Our clients needed something that would allow them to communicate with us from various locations in the UK, and keep up-to-date with their accounting records,' explains partner Damian Broughton.

The firm now lets clients enter basic cashbook transactions into a secure area via a web interface. And for the umbrella company Danbro operates for around 450 contractors, it also offers an online timesheet and expense logging system that feeds information into a Quickbooks-based, back-end system.

'The benefit from a client's point of view is more visibility with what's going on with their accounts. It's something some of our competitors don't have,' says Broughton.

However, firms have to set the technical and security challenges against all these business benefits. For accountants dealing with sensitive client data, security is a key issue and one underscored by legislation.

CLB Littlejohn Frazer's laptop users often complain about the stringent security measures the firm has imposed, but they are essential. 'The minute you have a portal from your internal systems to the outside world, you have a risk,' Singer says. 'Always make sure that you understand what the risks are for your company, have analysed them and mitigated them. If you can't mitigate the risk of mobile working, you shouldn't do it.'

The firm's mobile users can only access the firm's systems via their official laptops, which have a heavily locked-down desktop environment. 'Laptop users can't install software, run video, or connect to certain sites. Whenever they log on to the network it takes a few minutes because we have to make sure their virus protection is up-to-date, and any software updates have been applied,' Singer explains.

Because passwords are a major area of vulnerability, the firm has installed an extra security layer. To log on to the network, users have to enter a combination of their own unique password and a random number generated by a special keyfob device that the user carries with them.

For smaller accountancy firms, implementing heavy-duty security measures to get the benefits of remote working may seem like a tall order. An alternative is to outsource your mobile access to an application service provider (ASP), which will provide services such as email, file and application access via a web interface for a monthly fee.

This transfers the worry about security, maintenance and keeping the systems running to a third party, plus firms receive predictable monthly IT costs. The downside is that you're relying on someone else to safeguard your business information.

Before going down the ASP route, Tomas Doran of network security firm NTA Monitor says you should conduct due diligence.

'You need to make sure it's a vendor you can trust and will stick around. You need assurances that it's a professionally security-tested solution and network, and you must ensure the ASP maintains a decent audit trail. If the worst comes to the worst, you need to be able to prove you've done your best to keep data secure,' he says.

Stephen R Long & Co is trialling the Biztranet extranet service from Bizezia. As well as giving web-based access to email and business applications, it comes with optional information resources for accountants and document templates.

Cole acknowledges that the system has to store 'quite a lot of confidential information'. On the other hand, Bizezia's network partner Webexone is a \$249m (£142m) network specialist with the resources to maintain a highly secure virtual private network. For a small firm, the ability to log on to its business information from any web-enabled PC is a big advantage.

The issues aren't all technical. Before taking the plunge into mobile working, you need to make sure it is managed properly.

'You can't just have remote working if the culture's not there to support it,' says Sale. 'In a small company, it's down to how well managers support people working remotely, and whether the individual has the right skills to work successfully from home. They need to be flexible and self-motivational.'

Before adopting mobile technology, firms need to take a close look at the benefits, the risks and how to address them. But in a business environment where easy access to information is becoming the norm, accountancy firms should be taking mobile working seriously, especially since there is no shortage of solutions to help firms of all sizes to address the security challenges.