

Time to unwire the workplace?

Beyond assisting remote staffers, wireless technology may benefit on-site operations

THIS COLUMN IS NOT ABOUT trying to sell news and information via wireless services. So stifle that yawn. It is an early alert about interesting innovations in wireless workplace connectivity and tools that enable mobile workers to do their jobs better and faster.

I write this after watching more than 40 presentations at the recent Demo-Mobile conference in La Jolla, Calif. Of so many conferences, this is one of my favorites. It glances at emerging technologies and explores business methods of entrepreneurs. (Yes, there are still some of those around.)

Of the wireless technologies being developed and deployed, the one that may hold the greatest potential for newspaper companies is the one with the most complicated name. Technical protocol 802.11b, sometimes referred to as WiFi, is the equivalent of a wireless Ethernet, connecting computers to a hub or to the Internet. And it is fast, moving data at 11 megabytes per second — truly broadband speed.

For the media industry, such technology has two important uses: wireless access to both public and corporate networks and expanding connectivity to parts of a corporation that have been bringing up the rear in the technology revolution.

Wireless access

I have been using an 802.11b PC card during my travels for the past year and find it a very reliable way to connect to

the Internet and handle my connectivity and communications chores. The card is only slightly larger than a typical PC card because its antenna needs to be outside the computer slot. Once I plug it into my laptop, all I need is access to the card's hub. Airports, universities, and similar public places are deploying these network hubs.

MobileStar's network has arranged to put wireless hubs in American Airlines'

airport clubs. Since it is easier and cheaper than pushing wire through hundreds of rooms, hotels also are starting to use this technology. Even some Starbuck's locations have 802.11b access. Order a large mocha, plug in, and get wired. As 802.11b networks expand, they will give newspaper reporters and sales staff more efficient access to their offices. Keeping those folks

on the street is good for business. As more wireless network hubs are installed, information-technology managers should think about how to supply and support this new method of staying connected.

Expanding connections

Even more important are the opportunities to use wireless connectivity within a newspaper company's internal networks. Because of expense or difficulty in wiring, there are still departments not served by a paper's network. The technology revolution, for the most part, has left behind mailrooms, pressrooms, and distribution centers. Wireless connectivity will bring

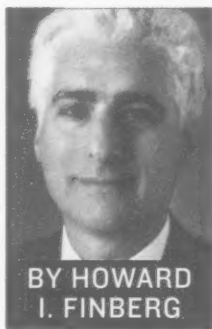
instant data access to all departments.

Shipping giant UPS is one example of how this technology can be deployed. Bar codes on packages will be scanned during sorting using a ring — a portable laser bar-code scanner worn on the finger. The scanner communicates, using another wireless technology (Bluetooth), with a wearable terminal. The terminal sends the package information through the 802.11b network to the UPS tracking database. This enables UPS to collect information wherever it is generated, in real time.

Similar systems in a newspaper mailroom could allow instant tracking of pallets of inserts as they are shipped, stored, and later sent around to distribution centers. Or bar codes on press plates could be scanned as they are put on the press and instantly display on the newspaper's production tracking system. Even simpler: setting up a wireless network would allow production supervisors and workers without fixed office space access to the company's network services without having to wire a fixed location.

Companies with large technology departments, like UPS, are not the only ones deploying wireless projects. Wireless software maker AvantGo announced at DemoMobile its Mobile Delivery system, which provides real-time package-tracking information. AvantGo claims the system is an off-the-shelf solution that uses standard Web-development tools. Many newspaper online departments already have used AvantGo tools to deliver news content, and they find those tools easy to use.

The point here isn't to specify applications that will be right for your organization. Wired or wireless, it's all about sharing data quickly and simply so that our newsrooms can offer the most accurate and up-to-date information, our advertisers experience the best customer service, and our readers get the best possible newspaper. ■



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