How to keep mobile users happy
As well as the business

By Josie Sephton, August 2010

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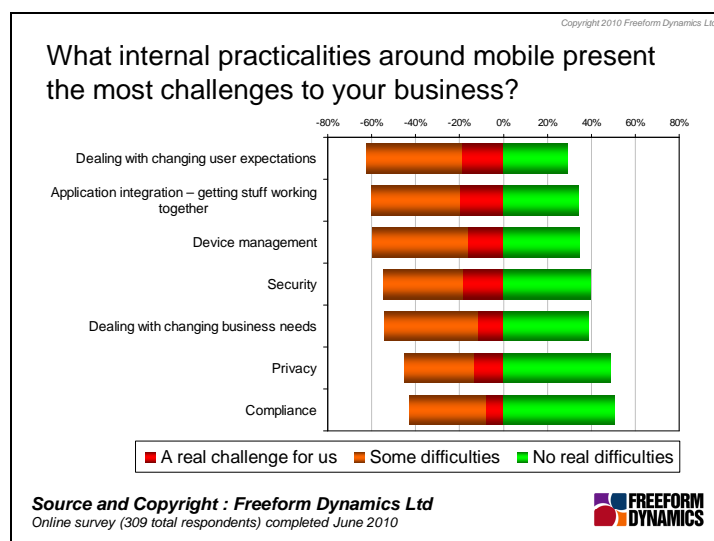BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY LEADERSHIP

The following article was originally published as part of the Freeform Dynamics advisory column on CIO Online. This is focused on the business impact of development in the technology industry. Original articles can be accessed at www.cio.co.uk (registration required).

Once upon a time, not so long ago, provisioning and managing mobile devices within the business was a relatively straightforward exercise. Corporate devices were issued to the upper echelons of management, and based on a handful of standard models – which is pretty much all that was available. Usage was relatively light, restricted initially to voice, and over time, some data traffic.

Fast forward to present day and the picture is a very different one. Mobile devices occupy a critical position in many businesses, and have moved far beyond their humble beginnings. Technology has leapt ahead, and in doing so, has underpinned the dramatic revolution in working practices, practicality, applications and communications.

In this new world, IT finds itself dealing with a number of different aspects around provisioning and management. The challenges arising from these aspects range from securing the best pricing packages to integrating the plethora of mobile devices with corporate applications and systems.

The chart below, taken from recent research carried out by Freeform Dynamics with IT and business professionals into their use of mobile devices in the business environment, shows some of the issues that companies are facing.

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What internal practicalities around mobile present the most challenges to your business?

Dealing with changing user expectations

Application integration – getting stuff working together

Device management

Security

Dealing with changing business needs

Privacy

Compliance

■ A real challenge for us ■ Some difficulties ■ No real difficulties

Source and Copyright : Freeform Dynamics Ltd
Online survey (309 total respondents) completed June 2010

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Although no one particular area stands out as being trouble-free, what causes the most difficulty is dealing with changing user expectations. This is unsurprising, given that mobile technology is so pervasive in both personal and work life, and people increasingly want to incorporate more of their personal applications and services into their work life.

But giving users what they want is likely to be risky on a number of levels. Security, for example, becomes a much greater challenge as the resulting permutations and combinations of devices, services and applications give rise to increased risk of security breaches. Even if most users follow company policy pretty diligently, there will always be the few that bypass the rules, potentially leaving the company exposed. And from an integration and support perspective, meeting user expectations fully would put an unnecessary and significant burden on resourcing.

Even if IT was able to deliver what users wanted at a given point in time – which is unlikely as IT managers tell us that, from their perspective, expectations are often not grounded in reality – it probably wouldn't be able to keep up with the current trends. The mobile world is a fast changing one, and new demands would quickly surface, much like a spoilt child who has too many toys at his disposal, but still wants more.

This doesn't mean that companies should completely ignore what users want and enforce a complete clamp-down, micro-managing the environment to ensure that everyone does as they are told. This in itself can be very resource intensive and counter-productive. The need to allow exceptions to the rule will always arise, irrespective of how tightly things are implemented which could lead to a level of dissatisfaction across the company that will be hard to dispel. We all know how it goes, the marketing director demands that IT integrates and supports the new nifty piece of kit he has bought, as he feels it is absolutely critical to his job – even though everyone knows it isn't really. Such 'special treatment' can reinforce political divisions, and create a cascade of resentment, particularly if the majority of users have to work with what they have been given. And once individuals realise that something different is permissible for the select few, the temptation to procure services or kit independently, using local budgets or expense accounts, or even out of their own pocket, will surface. This has the potential to be much more detrimental to the business than meeting users at least part way. For example, while some of the services, applications, or devices that users self-source over and above standard company issue might deliver a few additional benefits, critical functionality could be missing. Moreover, the likelihood is that users are more likely to do things that are superfluous to company requirements, and potentially dangerous to the business, such as synchronising sensitive data to devices with limited or no encryption and only basic pin code protection.

While the role of IT is to deliver the services that their 'customers' need, the user experience only matters to the point that staff are able to carry out their work properly, and morale remains good. Creating the illusion of choice while ensuring that security and application integration is properly addressed – using an official platform and a selected list of devices, for example – could comfortably achieve this. Ascertaining the right balance between what works operationally and from a user's point of view is the unenviable task of the CIO or IT director, but approaching it with the user needs in mind is undoubtedly the best staring point. Our research has shown that the companies which have the most satisfied users tend to be those that have sought user counsel, and taken their needs and wants into account, while at the same time working within defined boundaries reinforced by the development of a culture of responsible behaviour. Conversely, probably the biggest cause of failure across most implementations is when IT tries to go it alone. This holds true across all aspects of IT and communications provision.

Of course, there will always be some users who complain – it is in their nature. Like the spoilt child, protecting them from their own actions while carefully guiding them works much better in the long run than giving in to every whim and fancy.

About Freeform Dynamics

Freeform Dynamics is a research and analysis firm. We track and report on the business impact of developments in the IT and communications sectors.

As part of this, we use an innovative research methodology to gather feedback directly from those involved in IT strategy, planning, procurement and implementation. Our output is therefore grounded in real-world practicality for use by mainstream business and IT professionals.

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