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[Tech Trends]

On the Move

Smartphones prove to be a sound tool for keeping businesses running.

By Ben Bradley

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Photo: Michael Winokur/Aurora Select

Aaron Gray of Burnett + Company in California says BlackBerrys revolutionize the way the accounting firm does business.

Ross Cofer, a partner at Burnett + Company, had been waiting patiently for a client at a crowded restaurant when his phone buzzed with a new text message: "Another 'fire' at the office! Sorry, but we'll have to reschedule."

This message appeared on Cofer's smartphone, a **BlackBerry Bold 9000** that let him call the client to reschedule, update his calendar in Outlook, e-mail his assistant to tell her he would be back in the office in a half-hour and check a project update from the company server. And now, because it appeared as though rain might foil a little league game set for later that evening, Cofer checked the local weather forecast on the Internet before rushing out the door and stowing his phone in his shirt pocket.

Smartphones have so transformed the work lives of employees at Burnett + Company, a public accounting firm in Rancho Cordova, Calif., that IT Manager Aaron Gray even remembers the day the first new phones arrived: Aug. 22, 2007.

"Everybody likes a shiny new toy, and this toy has absolutely revolutionized our business in terms of the efficiency and mobility that it has given us, especially when we're serving our clients outside of the office," Gray says. "You'd pretty much have to torture me to get rid of them because we cannot offer our clients the same availability without them."

Such boundless enthusiasm for smartphones is growing among small and medium-size businesses, which are using them for nearly as many office functions as their personal computers — only conveniently untethered by power cords and power strips.


As more businesses embrace real-time document repositories and on-call Internet applications, smartphones deliver a seamless sense of efficiency between the office and anyplace else an employee might be, and all at a cost that most businesses find well worth the investment. (Figure about \$200 for the phone itself and about \$1,500 per year, per employee, for Internet service, says Chris Hazelton, research director at The 451 Group in Boston.)

24-Hour Availability

The 24x7 nature of communication comes as music to the ears of the clients of Skjold-Barthel, a seven-person law firm in Minneapolis that uses **Sprint HTC Pro** smartphones. Because of the often stressful nature of their cases, legal clients especially appreciate

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timely communication, says firm partner Ben Skjold.

servers at headquarters.

“Being responsive to our clients is critical, so even if we e-mail them and say, ‘I’ll be in touch with you tomorrow,’ we put their minds at ease because they know they’ve connected with us,” he says. “To respond in such an immediate fashion, without being tied to the office, gives us an invaluable competitive advantage. And besides, we can get more work done too.”

Almost equally valuable to the firm: unified messaging with voicemail from the office. In this case, the phones pick up .wav files attached to e-mails, thereby eliminating the need for lawyers to dial into the firm’s voicemail system.

“Certain applications, like getting directions, obviously make life easier,” Skjold says. “But the integration to our office systems, including Excel and Word, is key to making the most of these devices.”

Aiding the Impaired

If employees at SMBs are coming to prize the ease and mobility of cell phones, one needs only to speak to Dana Marlowe, principal partner with Accessibility Partners in Washington, D.C., to learn how the phones are making a real difference for people with disabilities.

Marlowe works as an advocate before federal agencies and Fortune 500 companies, encouraging them to make technology and consumer electronics accessible to people who are blind, deaf, or physically or mentally disabled.

In addition to being “practically glued” to her **BlackBerry Curve** as she communicates with six colleagues around the country, Marlowe says smartphones give people with disabilities a newfound sense of autonomy and independence.

“Let’s say Joe Smith lives four hours out of Chicago in a rural area. Joe is blind, but he has a college degree, is computer savvy and has a computer that reads out loud for him,” she explains. “With a smartphone, Joe has global accessibility; he can work anywhere in the world and no one even has to know he has a disability. He has his independence and can take pride in having a job. It’s huge.”

And, from all indications, always-on connectivity will continue to grow in influence. Gray’s accounting firm, for example, eventually would like to access client tax returns via smartphones.

For now, Gray has what may be considered more domestic interests: He would like his smartphone to function as a garage-door opener and universal remote control.

And if it can someday do all that, he suggests that it might not be long before it puts out fires, too — both real and metaphorical.

BizTech Quick Poll

Which type of mobile device do you consider the most critical to day-to-day operations at your business?

- 61%** Smartphones
- 37%** Notebooks
- 1%** Netbooks
- 1%** Tablet PCs

SOURCE: CDW poll of 390 BizTech readers

Top Five Smartphone Applications

People with smartphones simply work smarter at everything they do.

So says Chris Hazelton, research director at The 451 Group in Boston, who actively tracks and studies IT trends and believes that small businesses in particular have reaped significant dividends from using smartphones.

“They’ve had a much greater impact at smaller companies with, say, five or 10 people,” he says. “When these people are unreachable, it’s much more critical to day-to-day business operations than at bigger companies.”

In a recent study of 89 employees at small- and medium-size companies, Hazelton found that the five most popular uses of smartphones are:

- Mobile e-mail, used by 79.8 percent of respondents;
- Customer relationship management, used by 42.7 percent;
- Instant messaging, used by 41.6 percent;
- Business intelligence — defined as information unique to a particular company, such as sales, inventory or pricing information — used by 37.1 percent; and

Global positioning systems (GPS), a navigational tool, used by 34.8 percent.

Although he doesn't have a crystal ball, Hazelton predicts that people will use their smartphones to work on real-time collaboration tools such as hosted applications and spreadsheets.

"Up until now, these applications haven't been a big focus of smartphones," he says. "But now with real-time applications, allowing everyone to see and access information in real time, smartphones will continue to revolutionize the world of IT."

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