

Push email just the catches

AS the mobile phone stretches its horizons well beyond the send button, IT giant Microsoft has added its name to the 'push email' corporate market and has signed a number of deals with some major players in mobile technology, including Vodafone and T-Mobile, writes Jack Handley.

'Push email' is so called because emails are 'pushed' (sent to the user's mobile device) as soon as the email hits the company server, instead of waiting till the user synchronises the mobile phone with the server.

Microsoft's move comes at a time when the market for mobile email is about to take off. According to analyst Gartner, by the end of 2006 there will be at least 16 million business and consumer users of mobile email. It is expected that by the end of 2008, half of all employees who access email via PCs will also have access to wireless email.

Regarding the new system, Pieter Knook, senior vice president — mobile and embedded devices, Microsoft, said that the company sees exponential growth in this area.

According to a recent report from Datamonitor, revenues from mobile email will triple to US\$600m by 2009.

Not every telco initially will support the Microsoft service. Early adopters Orange, T-Mobile and Vodafone have promised to offer free upgrades to the Messaging and Security Feature Pack (MSFP) for their Windows Mobile 5.0 users. This will bring Direct Push email, improved device management and security for messaging applications to their handsets. Palm says it also will offer a free MSFP upgrade and other handset providers will develop a crop of new devices.

Microsoft made its announcements at the GSM Show in Barcelona, bundling its various technologies together to offer a comprehensive mobile email solution to companies with Microsoft Windows Mobile 5.0 and Exchange Server 2003 with Service Pack 2.

Microsoft says the Direct Push email service is designed for anyone familiar with Microsoft Office. Emails and tasks can be synchronised directly from Outlook, and Microsoft Office Excel Mobile and Word Mobile attachments can be viewed, edited and returned.

From the participating telcos, Vodafone's service will be rolled out in the UK, Germany and Spain. Microsoft's deal with T-Mobile covers the Netherlands.

The 2006 phone email market is still dominated by the cultish Blackberry, but other companies are emerging. US-based Funambol has released an open-source mobile email platform that the company says will provide a powerful solution for both carriers and enterprises.



Blackberry dominates phone email market.

Funambol v.3, as the new product is called, works over Blackberry, Microsoft Windows Mobile, and WAP-enabled phones. Based on the device management and synchronisation standard from the Open Mobile Alliance, the new open-source software allows users to check email on or offline, open attachments, schedule meetings, and synchronise calendars, address books, and task lists.

V.3 works on the client pre-loaded on the mobile phone or PDA, so users do not need to change out their existing device or client software to use Funambol's solution.

"The idea is we have a plug-in, you're not changing the user interface," said Funambol CEO Fabrizio Capobianco. "It's a piece of code you plug into your device. You use the same user interface, the same email client, address book, and calendar, and when email is pushed to your device it's taken by our client."

Non-Blackberry options for mobile email received increasing attention following the possibility of a Blackberry service shutdown, due to Blackberry-maker Research In Motion's legal dispute with NTP over the patents behind mobile email.

Many users, like Dave Rosenberg, CIO of San Francisco-

start as Microsoft the mobile wave

based investment research firm Glass Lewis, have been forced to prepare backup plans.

In the event of a Blackberry shutdown, Rosenberg said his company would switch to Treo devices using the Palm operating system.

"But I would absolutely consider going with a full open-source solution like Funambol," he adds. "I've tried it on my Treo, and while it maybe doesn't have the complete set of features that you get with Blackberry or Palm, it has enough feature parity to make it a very viable option."

Downloads of the basic Funambol solution have gone from 8,000 in December 2004 to 23,000 a year later, Capobianco claimed.

The open-source path, he added, is inevitably the future of push email and other mobile applications.

"If you look at the market for push email, Blackberry and other proprietary systems really just work on smartphones," he said. "But 96 percent of the market is for mobile phones.

There will be one billion mobile phones sold worldwide this year. How can you make sure your platform works with one billion new phones every year? The only way is through the community effort that open-source provides."

Not everyone agrees, however. Rick Osterloh, VP of products at RIM competitor Good Technology said: "Wireless messaging and corporate data access, for the enterprise, is fundamentally a managed service business, not a software business. You can't leave customers to integrate and manage complex carrier relationships and integrate software components themselves. Businesses need an entity that can pull all of those components together, make them work together, and troubleshoot the entire system when something goes wrong."



Hold the phone, did someone call your projector

YESTERDAY's mobile phone is dead. Today's phone and camera model is tomorrow's dinosaur and tomorrow's phone will hold only a fraction of the power and flexibility we can expect as standard in maybe another year (or two).

From the user's perspective, innovations in the next few years will truly transform today's phone/PDA into a travelling office, restricted only by how much we're prepared to pay for miniaturisation, power and software.

Let's deal with the big problems first: A PDA-size screen isn't much use for working on applications like spreadsheets or Powerpoint-type presentations, it's too bitty.

So too, a PDA screen isn't great for television or video. Neither is a phone keyboard ideal for touch typing.

And for these reasons alone, many people hold back from purchasing phones that can deliver the technology but in real terms, can't make it 'usable'.

Tomorrow, though, it's quite possible that the phone keyboard will expand (stretch is a better term) to lie flat beside the phone and allow almost full-size pc keyboarding.

And the camera at the back of the phone will double as a data projector lens, showing an A4 size spreadsheet or movie on a wall (or a sheet of white paper you carry with you for the purpose).

And who'll be there? Microsoft, which is now emerging as a new player in the game of sexy phone. "Microsoft can't make much money selling operating systems for handsets," says Ben Wood of researcher Gartner. "Instead, it's now looking at an even bigger opportunity."

Microsoft also is entering the mobile-based search technology market. In February it revealed plans to buy a French mobile search technology company called MotionBridge. By combining its own technology, Microsoft "will provide mobile operators and consumers with an even richer search experience," said Christopher Payne, corporate vice-president of MSN Search, in a press release.