

Will mobile broadband really spell the end for fixed line connectivity?

This year has seen an explosion in the uptake of mobile broadband, leading some to suggest that it is becoming a real threat to fixed-line broadband providers. Dan Cole, head of product management at THUS plc explains why businesses should not consider trading in their fixed-line connections no matter how tempting it may seem.

Mobile broadband is an excellent technology for businesses of all sizes. Data released this week has highlighted just how successful this technology is becoming, with mobile operator 3UK announcing a predicted 14-fold increase in use since it first launched its offering in December 2006. This has led some to speculate that the technology is becoming a real threat to fixed-line broadband due to its flexibility and reported higher speeds.

It is clear, however, that such speculation is alarmist. For the business market at least, mobile broadband should not be seen as a replacement to fixed-line broadband but rather as part of a complete networking solution and wider convergence story.

At present mobile broadband is not in a position to challenge fixed-line connectivity. Although the advertised data rates are on paper faster than the UK fixed-line average (3.6Mbps vs 2.95Mbps according to online comparison site Broadband Expert) this is not always the case in reality. Just as with fixed-line broadband the actual download speeds are often a lot less than advertised often dropping down to speed in the hundreds of Kbps. Although this may be acceptable for a worker needing to connect while on the move, it does not offer fast enough speeds for the demands of the office environment.

Moreover, many consumer mobile broadband offerings have fair usage policies attached to them, restricting users to just 2-3Gbps worth of data download per month. This is far from satisfactory for business users. If they buy mobile broadband as part of a complete business solution, however, workers are not restricted by these limits and can rely on this technology when out of the office.

It must be remembered, however, that 3G coverage is still quite patchy, especially in rural areas. This can lead to a significant slowdown in data transmission speeds. This is not of vital importance for mobile workers, but if an office is situated in such an area, consistently low speeds would make the experience almost impossible to work with.

It is true that as the technology develops, mobile broadband will become faster and the coverage wider, improving the overall quality. Fixed-line broadband, however, will also continue to improve and at a much faster rate. The relative position of mobile broadband compared to fixed-line will not change, with the latter still offering businesses the best form of connectivity for the office.

Mobile broadband does fill a need. It allows operators to offer businesses the right access method to get the right applications to them, at the right time. However, it should be considered as part of a much wider convergence story and should always be seen as complementary to fixed-line broadband rather than an alternative.

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