From Need to Know to Need to Share

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Business owners and individuals in management can’t help but feel the pressure from all sides to bring their workforce into the mobile age: Their employees are forcing the transition by bringing their own mobile expectations into the office each day.

Their competition forces their hand by the mere threat that they may have gone mobile sooner — and more thoroughly — than themselves. And last but not least, the very nature of how society functions is transforming the traditional nine-to-five technology solutions into obsolete and arbitrary intrusions on modern workflows.

So what is a company to do about all this? How do they successfully transition their workforce from stationary workstations to mobile collaborators? The answer may not be as easy as slapping a smart phone into the hands of every employee.

Evaluate Necessity

Every expert on the mobile industry emphasizes over and over again the need for a mobile strategy and not just mobility itself. The first step in that strategy has to be evaluating whether or not this is something that will affect your business development plan positively. Is it going to help your business accomplish the goals that you have already established in your strategic planning? Scott Frymire, senior manager of product marketing at Epicor, an ERP software solutions company, says that a business cannot stress this point enough. “When you are talking about mobility for distribution, there are a couple strategic and tactical questions that you need to be asking yourself. The one that trumps all the others would be ‘Is this

going to generate revenue or cost savings or competitive advantage for my business? If it does, if the answer is yes, then take that opportunity.' "

The second point to consider when taking a company mobile is who needs to be outfitted with a mobile device — not everyone does. Troy Fulton, director of product marketing at Tangoe, a global provider of communication lifecycle management (CLM) services, outlines who needs company-sponsored mobile connectivity. "Sales staff, those who need to be in consistent contact with customer, those who are heavy travelers or need to be constant touch with other team members (like the executive team): these are the people that need mobile devices." The driving question when analyzing this point must be: will this person carrying this device add value back to the overall business because of their newfound connectivity?

That being said, there is a distinct advantage to having the majority of your workforce connected across a mobile platform. Frymire notes "One of the things that has become extremely apparent to us with the explosion of mobility across the industry is that people prefer to work when, where, and how they want. They prefer to be as powerful in the business world as they are in the consumer world." Employees today want the way they work to reflect the way they live, and today, that model looks like mobility.

Fulton calls this movement the "need-to-share" aspect of today's society. Whereas a decade ago employees were tethered to stationary computing devices that had extremely pinpointed functions, today's options for technology are endless and fluid. He says we have adapted from an IT-driven "need-to-know" stance on computers, to a consumer- (and consequently, employee-) driven "need-to-share" environment. Mobility, he says, "gave people this platform to communicate in real time and collaborate from their own perspective. For human beings, that is powerful stuff, and they want it in their workplaces, too."

Sidestep the Device Wars

Any tech user today knows how quickly new devices become obsolete. However, there is a way to step around this inherent evil of innovation and ensure your team and their equipment remain relevant longer than the average duration of a head cold. The key is to focus not on the devices themselves, but on what the devices can do for you.

Allen Duet, director of product management at Sage North America, a software solutions provider, says to "seek device-independent applications that will work for one person on an iPhone, another on an Android, a Blackberry, and so on. When everyone can access the same database from their preferred devices, adoption and productivity grow." When your software is flexible and independent of rigid device controls, mobility will be a more fluid activity for your company.

Frymire echoes the fact, emphasizing the universal connector in the world of technology: the world wide web. "Don't bet against the internet," he says, "Make sure you are using a web-based app that is portable from device to device to device." This way, even if next year all the expensive devices that you just invested

in disappear, you can add new devices as needed without overhauling the entire stock again. It’s also a way to keep employees comfortable in keeping the technology that they are used to consistent. They may have to adjust to new hardware in a year or two, but they won’t have to adjust to new software at the same time. Every management team knows that if employees don’t like the change, the change will not happen effectively.

Avoid Misuse with Corporate Policy

Once the decision is made to outfit a workforce, the question becomes how to make it happen. There are two approaches a company can follow to make mobility a reality: corporate-liable (CL) plans or individual-liable (IL) plans. The traditional approach is for a company itself to procure the physical devices, the software contracts, and the actual service plans from a mobile provider and then just hand the pieces out to employees to use, covering the upfront bill entirely. Another trend happening now is BYOD — bring your own device. This is where employees themselves can choose their own device and sometimes their own mobile carrier, and are then simply reimbursed by their company for its corporate usage. This can be a flat fee, after which the employee is responsible for all charges associated with the contract, or a company can choose to cover the full cost of the plan, hoping to instill in their employees words of overage caution and minute moderation.

The problems with either approach can be many, but they can be minimized or avoided if a company first creates and enforces a mobile usage policy and disseminates that policy effectively to their workforce. The policy must be specific regardless of who owns the device. Be firm on what the company will or will not cover, what applications or functions of the phone should or shouldn’t’ be used, and make sure to create a process that deals with information security. In the case that a device is lost or stolen, the device — and the information on it — will need to be deactivated and wiped remotely.

A company must also take into consideration a strategy for managing the devices that spread their company info out into the world. Fulton notes that companies have a “judiciary responsibility to track and monitor how the device and information are used.” Since that device has access to corporate information, great care must be taken to ensure that customer information doesn’t become too public or too easily accessible. Security on company devices should be a proactive affair and not a reactive affair, helping to eliminate risk before it happens and ensure continued good relationships with those customers whose data you are entrusted.

Think Process, Not Transaction

The most important thing to remember after your company goes mobile is that mobility is a process and not a simple transaction. Once you have done the research, chosen your plan, briefed your employees and instituted a strategy, remember that it does not stop there. Being mobile in today’s world means being flexible as new technologies and new opportunities come along to enhance or replace old ones.

Employees will change, their tastes will change and the overall experience of mobility will change with time. A company that doesn't tether themselves to a specific device or habit of operation will be the one that adopts these changes most fluently — and hopefully well enough to give them the competitive edge and a hefty return on investment.

What's your take? Please feel free to email abbigail.kriebs@advantagemedia.com *[1] or comment below!*

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