Supporting a Mobile Workforce

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The workforces in today’s organizations are increasingly mobilized. Mobile workers are away from their desks regularly and use mobile computing devices in various locations to perform their duties.

A mobile workforce lets enterprises

- provide customer service almost anytime and anywhere;
- extend business hours, since workers can work from home or on the road; and
- reduce operating expenses associated with maintaining an office infrastructure.

As mobility continues to play a key role in helping organizations improve customer service, boost productivity, and reduce costs, the global mobile-worker population will continue to increase.

However, supporting a mobile workforce can be a daunting task.

The Challenges

According to the International Data Corporation, the world’s mobile-worker population will pass the one billion mark this year and grow to nearly 1.2 billion people—more than a third of the world’s workforce—by 2013.1

Organizations face several challenges in supporting such workers.

The first challenge is providing multifaceted technical support, given the mixture of different mobile devices and services. A lack of standards also complicates technical support. Furthermore, bumpy roads, accidental drops, or spilled coffee can all wreak havoc on mobile devices.

The next challenge is addressing security risks. Although mobility offers many benefits to an enterprise, it also introduces the risks inherent in allowing sensitive data to sit on small mobile devices, which can be easily lost.

Finally, it’s difficult to keep track of employees’ locations and the time they actually spend working. Making sure employees are doing what they’re supposed to be doing also requires special tracking and monitoring capabilities.

A Mobile Strategy

Transitioning from a traditional office to an anytime and anywhere mobile office requires establishing and executing an effective strategy that balances the people, processes, and technology involved.

The People

To support and manage a mobile workforce, an organization should perform a comprehensive analysis of its mobile workers. It should assess worker profiles along three perspectives: business needs, access locations, and usage patterns.2

The business needs include the criticality, time sensitivity, and customer expectations of worker activity. How critical is the activity to the enterprise? How much does the activity cost the enterprise? Does it require a real-time or near real-time response? What’s the activity’s value and its impact on customer satisfaction?

Then, the organization must consider how a mobile worker performs tasks. Is he or she receiving alerts or messages, responding to messages, filling out forms, creating documents, performing more-complex tasks, or a combination of these?

Enterprises can improve organizational effectiveness and save significant costs by assessing and analyzing their mobile worker profiles. This also improves the visibility of mobile investments, points out opportunities to pool purchasing power, and can be used to create phased plans for mobile support.

The Policies

As mobile devices and services are increasingly being used in combination, organizations need a comprehensive set of policies to ensure consistency, security, compliance, and an optimized return on investment for mobile initiatives.

Policies should address the following key questions:

- Who is eligible?
- What are the user responsibilities?
- What technology is provided and supported?
• What level of access and services are provided and supported?
• Who buys or owns the device?
• Who pays for support?
• What service expenses will be covered?

Developing comprehensive mobile policies can’t be done in isolation—all key stakeholders must be involved.

The Technology
Only once an organization has analyzed the mobile-worker profiles and defined the policies should it make the technical decisions. These include selecting devices for each mobile-worker type, setting the communication requirements, selecting security requirements and support technologies, and formulating the support plan. Technology decisions should observe the following principles.

First of all, mobile solutions must align with the enterprise’s long-term mobility strategy. They should also allow for easy migration to new mobile platforms and support multiple platforms and form factors.

Second, the enterprise must keep its sensitive information out of the wrong hands by choosing mobile technology with built-in security features. For example, the devices should have encrypted hard drives, device tracking and recovery abilities, and user-authentication solutions such as integrated smart cards or biometric readers.

Third, the enterprise should choose a mobile solution provider with maintenance and management capabilities that let IT administrators remotely shut down, diagnose, repair, and update a device’s system via secured channels.

Finally, the enterprise should invest in hardware that’s designed to hold up in the toughest conditions. The hardware should have a reinforced chassis and robust hinges and latches to protect the hard drive and other durable features. Also, it’s best to have a service repair agreement that covers accidental damage.

Deployment
To successfully deploy its strategy for a mobile workforce, an enterprise should follow the following steps. (Note that with changing mobile-worker profiles, evolving practices and policies, and proliferating mobile technology and devices, the following deployment phases are iterative instead of sequential.)

Establish a Project Plan
Scope the project and establish the resources, budget, and governance systems. Integrate the project with strategic IT and business plans. Ensure you have buy-in and support from stakeholders on the project vision and strategy.

Develop the System Architecture
Define the system architecture, technology framework, and standards for the project. Articulate a project roadmap. Define process details and performance metrics. Communicate the system architecture.

Select a Practical Solution
Define detail requirements and specifications. Conduct a market survey and analyze market intelligence, and use benchmarks and pricing analysis. Evaluate provider options, choose the technologies, and negotiate service-level agreements, terms, conditions, and contracts.

Deploy the Selected Solution
Design the implementation infrastructure and tools. Develop rules, workflows, and user interfaces. Create development and test environments, and run tests. Staff the implementation and coordinate deployment. Seek and incorporate user feedback and identify and manage risks.

Operate, Expand, and Evolve
Operate and manage the implementation. Incorporate user feedback, risks, and changing business requirements to expand services. Monitor use and compliance and measure performance to improve services. Finally, refine processes and infuse new technologies to evolve services.

The mobile workforce has transformed the business world. Today’s business climate demands a mobile workforce that can provide customer services anytime, solve problems on the go, and stay connected anywhere.

As businesses look to do more and encourage the best from their workforce, flexible, on-demand access to information has become a requirement. Enterprises should manage mobility with the same rigor as other IT disciplines—that is, by employing mature corporate processes, applying effective tools, and following best practices.

References

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