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E-HR

# A PA in your pocket

The rise in mobile working has put pressure on managers to get more out of staff while they're on the move. Could a new software system known as MobilePA provide the answer? Sue Weekes reports.

Accessing e-mail via a mobile phone or a personal digital assistant (PDA) is already the norm for workers who spend a large amount of time out of the office, and it is a trend that is set to skyrocket.

By 2008, telecoms research company Analysys anticipates that around 40% of people with a business mobile will be accessing e-mail from their phones. And forecasts by technology industry trend watcher IDC predict that by 2009 there will be 850 million mobile workers worldwide, up from 650 million in 2004.

However, this rise in mobile workforces is placing pressure on organisations to equip their employees with mobile communication devices that offer more than just a way of keeping in touch with the office.

To be truly effective while away from their desks, staff need to be able to access other business applications and information, as well as their e-mail inboxes. Software company Sirenic believes it has the answer with its MobilePA technology, already dubbed by some commentators as the system that could overtake the ubiquitous BlackBerry handheld device.

MobilePA is a software application that

allows users to access and search a wide range of content on their mobile phones or handheld devices – including the BlackBerry. This could be anything from archived and current e-mails to data from back-office systems. The latter means that HR managers could look up and check data from their HR management or online recruitment system, and generally be more proactive while on the move.

“It is a key feature of this technology, and empowers you to make a decision about something happening back at the office,” says Ian Smith, director of IT at HR research consultancy, Diaz Research. “Before, you might have been able to find out what the problem was, but now, you can understand more clearly what the problem is and what needs to be done to solve it.”

MobilePA also allows you to access diary or contact directories, news information sources and share pictures, as well as listen to and reply by voice to e-mails and other content.

Bertrand Lipworth, chairman of Sirenic Group, claims that the technology is quicker than many other mobile information delivery channels, because it uses less data per e-mail, meaning faster downloads and lower charges. Other benefits include the ability to prioritise information.

“For every user, we can build up a knowledge base of their usage patterns and sophisticated heuristics [a means of tracking how people use the system]. This allows us to prioritise the user's most crucial 10 to 15 e-mails and ensure they are dealt with ahead of less important ones.”

The service can also send text message alerts when specific e-mails arrive, or when news or share price changes occur.

Organisations which use MobilePA for their workforce include the Commission for Rural Communities, an operating division of the Countryside Agency. A number of its employees are required to travel to rural areas, but despite being equipped with laptops and mobile phones, they were previously unable to check their e-mails without access to a phone line.

“We are an information-driven organisation and, in recent times, e-mail has become fundamental to everything we do,” says Jonathan Ballinger, IT, finance and estates



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manager of the commission. “MobilePA has reduced staff downtime and promoted more effective teamworking.”

But what does this mean for other handheld systems such as the BlackBerry? Lipworth argues that, since users can access MobilePA from a BlackBerry anyway, the application will add to, rather than replace, existing systems.

“A lot of companies have invested a lot of money in this device,” he says. “All large corporate managers typically want a laptop, mobile phone and a BlackBerry. Our software may ultimately allow staff to need only one of the three.”

HR professionals should look at the latest developments in mobile communications for themselves and for the wider workforce. For the latter, they are a powerful tool to support flexible working options. For the personal user, they are especially relevant for the increasingly mobile HR director or manager who, charged with responsibility for geographically dispersed sites, needs a method to stay not only in touch, but also in control of events back at base.



MobilePA's service starts at £10 a month and can be tailored to fit the needs of individuals and small- to medium-sized companies through to large organisations.

For more technical details and to sign up for a free trial, go to [www.mobilepa.com](http://www.mobilepa.com)