

A T-Mobile White Paper.

The role of Mobile Technology in Transformational Government.

Introduction.

As the Government increasingly looks to technology to deliver the transformation and modernisation that our public services desperately need, the reality is that the public sector, particularly at a local government level, has been relatively slow to adopt mobile technologies. Given the undoubted advantages that mobile technology can provide to local councils, this Paper looks to identify the main reasons for slow adoption of mobile working solutions within local government and presents a three-point plan for addressing these issues.

The Government's Transformational Government programme as outlined in the Cabinet Office Report of November 2005 stresses the need for technology to play a full and vital role in the modernisation of government services. In his foreword to the Report, the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon Tony Blair MP, emphasised the need for public services to "use technology to join up and share services".

The transformation strategy is one based on seizing the opportunity provided by technology to transform the business of government, at both central and local level. The Report states that technology has a major part to play in addressing the three major challenges that globalisation is setting modern governments. These are identified as economic productivity, social justices and public sector reform.

However, The Cabinet Office Report of November 2005, "Transformational Government: Enabled by Technology", makes little reference to the part that mobile technology should play in this wider technological transformation in public services. It has been widely accepted that the latest mobile technology will have a massive impact on the success of the transformation agenda yet public sector organisations have to date generally been slow to react to the transformation agenda, particularly when it comes to the introduction of mobile working.

Time to focus on mobile working.

In order to increase adoption of mobile technology within local government, T-Mobile is today calling for the Government to make mobile working a cornerstone of the transformation programme.

As mentioned before, the Cabinet Report on Transformational Government makes little reference to the role that mobile technology has to play in transforming public services, nor mobile technology per se. T-Mobile believes that this is a massive oversight given the widespread consensus that its success depends greatly on the effective adoption of mobile working practices across all government bodies.

It is clear that to in order to achieve the Government's target savings of £21.5bn by 2008, the adoption of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is essential. Whilst more public sector organisations are using technology to deliver services designed around the needs of citizens, mobile technology has been wrongly omitted from the Transformational Government agenda.

The public sector ICT mobility market is an immature market on the verge of dramatic growth. A recent report from Kable Research forecasted that UK public sector expenditure for mobile workers will grow from just under £900m in 2004/05 to £4.3bn by 2014/15. Growth in the adoption of mobile ICT solutions is expected primarily in local government and health care, but also in criminal justice, defence and central government.

Despite these predictions, it is little wonder that local government has been slow to invest in mobile technology and realise the role that mobile working can play in modernising and improving public services when the Government has completely overlooked this vital area within its transformation programme.

The potential of mobile working.

More than one in five workers in the UK are now employed in the public sector, equating to around 5.5 million people. Of these public sector workers, it is estimated that 20 per cent (1.1 million) are mobile workers. However, very few of these people are currently equipped with mobile technology, meaning that they are missing out on the potential productivity, efficiency and cost-saving benefits that this technology would bring.

Indeed, the potential benefits of mobilising the UK's public sector workforce have been well documented over recent years and there have undoubtedly been instances already where mobile working practices have been successfully adopted in government organisations to reduce costs, increase efficiency and productivity and improve the standard of service offered to the public.

The scope for mobile working within the public sector is immense. Mobile technology has been used to improve the efficiency and performance of a huge range of departments within public sector organisations, including environmental health, trading standards, building control, housing repairs, home care and housing benefits. In fact, it is very difficult to think of a public service that could not benefit from the adoption of effective mobile technology. The amount of time that mobile workers spend travelling back to the office to fill in and file paperwork is eliminated, as data only needs to be captured once, and this can be done whilst on site. The potential benefits are huge.

The need for guidance in mobile working.

Following on from this, T-Mobile also believes that local government organisations need much greater support and guidance on how to make mobile working a reality. At present there is insufficient advice for those councils that do decide to mobilise their workforce, and T-Mobile believes that this is one of the main reasons why many mobile technology strategies have failed.

T-Mobile believes that education in mobile working is vital. That is why it was the first mobile operator to sit on the steering committee of Project Nomad, a national project initiated by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) that aims to encourage local authorities to use mobile technology as a way of making best use of frontline staff. Nomad has done much good work in providing a comprehensive set of deliverables that should enable any local authority wishing to establish a mobile technology operation to do so with ease and confidence. However, more guidance is needed from a central level if we are to see serious adoption of mobile technology within public sector organisations.

Undoubtedly there is now an extremely wide range of mobile products and services available to these organisations. However, mobile working is about more than products and services. Beyond this public sector bodies also need to be educated about the wider considerations of mobile working and the impact that mobilising their workforces can have on the culture of an organisation.

In order for a successful transition to a mobile workforce it is imperative for any organisation to identify the business problem or opportunity that mobile working is set to address. Transformational Government is all about using technology to join up and share services.

This is something that mobile technology undoubtedly has the capacity to do. For example, if a public sector organisation wants to make its social workers more mobile, what is it hoping to achieve? Is it looking to increase the productivity of these workers, to improve the level of service that they offer to the public or perhaps to allow them to spend more time with each individual they visit?

Another example could be a local council that wants to mobilise its field staff such as council craft workers to increase productivity by enabling them to continue working throughout the day. Craft workers are true mobile workers, involved in building control, plumbing and housing repairs. What applications will the worker require on a mobile device in order to ensure that he or she does not have to return to the office and that he or she has access to all necessary information whilst on site? What type of device is best suited to the application and type of user in question? What will be the cultural impact of mobile working on the individual in terms of not seeing colleagues as often as before and perhaps feeling more isolated? Will managers find it harder to manage staff that are not returning to the office as much as before? Will they feel as though they have lost control and put in place unnecessary rules that only serve to thwart productivity in order to maintain this control?

These are the types of considerations that decision makers at public sector organisations should be reflecting upon before embarking on a mobile working plan. To date, the absence of adequate guidance has meant that many of these organisations that have attempted mobile working projects without the requisite early planning. Only when this preparation is carried out will mobile working assist in modernising public services.

The Problems of Adoption.

The first thing to note when examining the barriers to successful implementation of mobile working strategies within the public sector is that no two organisations are the same. Each public sector body has its own unique circumstances and requirements.

Similarly it is important to acknowledge that every type of mobile worker has a different working profile with drastically diverse mobile technology requirements.

It is worth reflecting on these two points at this stage as it is this lack of uniformity that makes it so challenging to draw up a concrete list of reasons for the relative failure of mobile strategies within local government bodies. The explanations vary for every organisation and include personnel, cultural, financial, social and political factors.

Indeed, it is very hard to formulate a broad overview of the reasons why local government has been slow to adopt mobile technology. This in itself presents its own problem for public sector bodies. A “one size fits all” mobile working solution does not and will not exist. Councils must come to terms with this fact before they embark on implementing their own solutions. Only once this fact has been acknowledged can councils actually use mobile technology to improve their performance and increase the standard of the services that they offer the public. Clearly, the fact that the Transformational Government Report overlooks the benefits of and need for mobile working does not help.

To tackle the issues raised above, T-Mobile has developed a three point plan which, if implemented correctly, could go a long way to speeding up the adoption of mobile working within local government. Whilst we know that each council has its own unique requirements, T-Mobile believes that this plan presents a sound starting point for councils looking to adopt a mobile strategy.

Implementing a successful mobile working programme.

Whilst progress to date has on the whole been slow, the situation is not necessarily as bleak as it may seem. The opportunities for mobile working and the associated benefits for local government services remain substantial and very attainable if the right measures are put in place. Mobile working solutions really can play a part in pushing through the Transformational Government programme and improving public services.

T-Mobile believes that a successful mobile working programme in a public sector organisation requires the following elements:

Thorough planning

A successful mobile working implementation is almost impossible without comprehensive planning before the implementation stage. Organisations must identify the exact areas of their business and the services that they offer that would benefit from mobile working. They must also examine the impact that a mobile working culture may have on the organisation as a whole.

Once the key objectives for a project have been agreed, the initial rollout of the scheme should be gradual and tightly monitored, across a handful of departments. This allows any glitches, whether technological or cultural, to be resolved immediately before the project is rolled out across the wider organisation.

Mobile user profiling

In order to ensure that workers are equipped with the most appropriate mobile devices and applications, it is essential to examine in detail the role and responsibilities of each mobile worker. It may be that some workers simply need a reliable mobile phone to stay in touch with the office. Other workers require mobile data and need to be able to access and update records, request other services or perhaps make appointments for those people that they visit in real-time whilst on the job. Other workers may be able to use mobile technology in order to be able to work from home. As local authorities increasingly look to cut costs, a reduction in the amount of office space that they require in expensive town centre locations can greatly reduce high overheads.

Mobile user profiling establishes exactly what a public sector worker needs and how his or her performance can be made more efficient and/or productive as a result of mobile working.

Educating staff about flexible working

The third essential step in ensuring the success of mobile working strategies within local government is a commitment to educate staff, both field staff and management, about mobile or flexible working. This does not simply involve teaching staff how to work their mobile devices and mobile data applications, although this is obviously needed.

Instead, it must go much further than this by educating staff about the changes in working practices and cultural differences that mobile working brings about. Staff may be worried that they will be constantly 'on call' once they are given a mobile device, whilst management may feel that they are losing control if they do not have face-to-face contact with their staff. Added to this, many organisations have run into problems when they have tried to expand successful pilot schemes into comprehensive rollouts across departments and organisations. In order to allay these worries, organisations must put in place a comprehensive mobile working policy which clearly outlines how the strategy will work in practice for every member of staff.

Clearly there are a myriad of issues affecting the adoption of mobile working strategies in local government and it would be churlish to presume that these three steps would eliminate all of the problems associated with this area. However, T-Mobile strongly believes that more thorough planning, greater user profiling and in-depth education on mobile working will have a significant impact on the successful adoption of mobile technology.

Conclusion.

If the Government is to succeed with its transformation programme and achieve savings of £21.5bn by 2008, it must address the failure of mobile working adoption within the public sector. Whilst Kable Research forecasts that UK public sector expenditure is set to increase from just under £900m in 2004/05 to £4.3bn by 2014/15, this investment will only produce real benefits if public sector organisations recognise the need to implement a mobile working strategy and put in place the right planning and processes to make it succeed.

A massive amount of public money was invested in the e-Government agenda and much of the foundation work of modernising public services is in place. Now is the time to build on this investment by keeping up momentum and delivering innovative mobile working solutions for public sector organisations.

More education on the potential benefits of mobile working for government organisations is required in order to build momentum and demand for the mobilisation of public sector workers. Much of this must come from central government itself and it is to be hoped that future Government reports and discussions will place more emphasis on the role of mobile technology within the transformational agenda. Certainly, the forthcoming Lyons Review, an independent inquiry into the future funding and function of local government in England, due in December 2006, will provide a clear indication of the extent to which the Government has woken up to the importance of mobile working in transforming public services.

