

Systems Channel News:

VARs see need for device to fill the cell phone-laptop gap

By Erin Kelly, Contributor
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Nearly every business professional has a laptop and a cell phone. The question is: Do they want or need something to fill the gap between those two devices?

Many VARs say yes. While some customers are thumb-typing pros who can live on their BlackBerrys, and others laud the merits of the iPhone's soft keyboard, many others say they need something with a more useable keyboard to respond to email and other tasks.

David Dadian, CEO of Powersolution.com, a Ho-Ho-Kus, N.J.-based solution provider, said he has not seen huge customer demand for lightweight, Web-savvy netbooks. The company still presents them as an option to some users.

"Once we build an application that is browser-based [for clients], we see a lot of the more mobile people are really opting for the netbook," Dadian said. "We're just going to them saying, 'the beauty of [a netbook] is you can run it anywhere if you're traveling instead of lugging around an 8-pound laptop.'"

Paul Clifford, president of The Davenport Group in St. Paul, Minn., said that in today's marketplace, netbooks have sparked a greater interest on a personal basis than on a corporate one. And this is because there is no entity today that has everything "in the cloud."

"When everything is in the cloud, all you'll need is a netbook because they deal with some of the greatest issues companies have -- primarily security," Clifford said. "There is very sensitive data sitting on laptops, but on netbooks people access data remotely. [Private data] only shows up on their screen."

One major problem is that the infrastructure of existing applications is not fully accessible from netbooks, and it may be years before they have this capability. Nevertheless, "netbooks are the platform of tomorrow," Clifford said. And the use of netbooks by vertical industries will be dictated by the availability of applications in the cloud.

However, Eric Nelson, director of business development for Alteritech Inc. in Washington, D.C., said verticals that have a large direct sales force will be a great fit for netbooks because salespeople cannot get everything they need from a mobile device, such as putting a sales quote on a BlackBerry.

Everything that these types of companies do is in some sort of Software as a Service (SaaS) application. The sales teams are using netbooks to access server-based software applications such as email, Salesforce.com and price quotes, Nelson said.

Amir Husain, president and CEO of VDIworks, in Austin, Texas, said the original operating system (OS) of choice for netbooks was Linux because it's free. But as netbook sales picked up in volume, many mainstream netbook providers began to offer Windows XP as a choice, he said.

"Microsoft began to offer discounts, allowing netbooks to make their way into the netbook form factor," Husain said. "With all [Microsoft's] software works included, Windows XP has become quite popular and is the dominant form for netbooks. Microsoft has built a number of netbook optimizations for Windows 7. Designed as a non-heavy OS, [Windows 7] will be optimized for netbooks and is providing preferential pricing when users apply this version on a netbook."

Jason Sparks, VP of storage and systems at Xiologix LLC, headquartered in Tualatin, Ore., said that MAC OS X is another operating system growing in popularity for netbooks.

"Apple products are high-cost, but their products are in demand and rock solid," Sparks said. "Windows XP is too bloated for memory configuration, [and] Linux doesn't have the usability function. But people are truly turning to OS X."

Despite critics' concern that Google Android is a non-starter for netbooks because it was originally designed for cell phones, VDIworks' Husain said Android's low resolution

is the only differentiation between the smartphone and a low-end netbook.

"Android was initially designed for lower resolution [and] a smaller sized [device]," Husain said. "Now, that's changing. I don't think the technical barriers are serious impediments to Android's success."

Yet a serious concern of Husain's is that by creating these low-cost netbooks, the PC industry has basically written its own death sentence.

"With carriers coming in and subsidizing, and with CPUs coming in and offering chips, the only area left for the PC industry [is] netbooks, as netbooks cost \$200 to \$300 a pop compared to desktops costing \$600 to \$700 or laptops costing \$1,000 to \$1,500," Husain said. "Either the PC industry will find out how to increase modernization for users, or it will die."

VDIworks' employees use netbooks for work and they deploy netbooks to clients within the government and military vertical, Husain said. Once a Web browser is available, the netbook allows users to do sales force and content creation through cloud services. Also, most netbooks run Microsoft Office very well.

"The only drawback [to the netbook] is the small size of the screen," Husain said.

Joe Brown, president of Accelera Solutions Inc., located in Falls Church, Va., uses his netbook when he is traveling and recommends netbooks for mobile individuals. Although he expects netbooks to become more popular in the next six months, the hottest place for netbooks right now is the college campus.

"As cloud computing matures and organizations evolve their computing structure to provide [the] SaaS model for users internally and externally, I believe that [the adoption] for devices like netbooks [will increase]," Brown said.