

It's a wide, wireless world

By [Mark Taylor](#)

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The combination of maturing wireless technologies, soaring office space costs and growing traffic has turned remote working and telecommuting into serious options for employers worldwide who want to retain staff and keep them happy and productive. The technology exists in South Africa, too, to give workers access to the Internet and the corporate network wherever they are.

The rapid rollout of cellular data and wireless broadband networks across SA's major centres has turned a world of wireless work into a compelling reality. Many SA professionals are already using cellular, broadband wireless and Wi-Fi connections for Internet access on the road, with adoption expected to soar over the next three years.

There are HR, IT security and management challenges to be faced by companies that introduce telecommuting strategies, though.

Some employees fear that they are less likely to advance in their careers if they work from home or from the road than workers who work in traditional office-settings, while many managers have concerns about controlling their staff and keeping them productive. Some workers feel isolated without an office to go to everyday and need structure to be productive.

Enormous impact

But the impact that mobile work and telecommuting has on productivity and customer service can be enormous, especially for a smaller company.

For example, a worker can download a presentation via a GSM or GPRS modem or Wi-Fi card at a coffee shop between meetings and not need to go into the office during a day packed with sales presentations. High-speed cellular connectivity technologies such as GPRS, EDGE, 3G and HSDPA make it possible for employees in the field to scan a corporate contacts list, place orders, check inventories or look up contact details remotely.

Telecommuting and remote working doesn't need to be an either-or-strategy, but can be blended with office work to strike a balance that suites company and employee. For example, employees might be given a few days a month when they're free to work from home, or given the flexibility to spend some of the working day at home and some at the office.

Many companies are already using wireless technologies in innovative ways to boost the productivity and happiness of their employees - one example is one of South Africa's major banks, which embarked on a wireless bus pilot project with

Imperial Fleet Services and Nashua Mobile. The buses transport employees to and from a central point in Centurion to the banking group's Sandton office, allowing them to get on with the day's work during the time they'd normally be stuck in traffic. The wireless bus is outfitted with cellular Internet connectivity, PCs and productivity software.

Better working experience

SA businesses and consumers value the personal and productivity benefits of mobile access to email and the Web. Wireless technology empowers employees and gives them a better working experience even while it improves productivity. The investment into training and infrastructure is low for the returns that it delivers. People can carry all the tools they need to stay in touch with them in their pockets or briefcases.

The adoption of cellular data services, in particular, continues to grow in leaps and bounds. Aggressive marketing of data services (such as 3G, GPRS, HSDPA etc) by all three cellular networks, as well as affordable tariffs (including attractive data bundles and contract packages) have encouraged the growth of the market.

Increasing market penetration of 3G- and GPRS-enabled phones as well as 3G and HSDPA network cards for notebooks has also spurred adoption.

While cellular connectivity is still expensive compared to wireless broadband or ADSL, prices will continue to fall, as evidenced by MTN slashing its data rates yet again in February 2007. Future developments such as aggressive WiMax rollouts in metropolitan areas will drive the market by giving users even faster and more reliable wireless connections.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Taylor is MD of independent cellular service provider Nashua Mobile which launched Nashua Mobile Internet earlier this week, offering a full portfolio of Internet access including fixed-line ADSL powered by Verizon; wireless Broadband from iBurst and Sentech; and, cellular technologies (including GPRS, EDGE, 3G and HSDPA) from all three mobile operators. In addition, the company offers services such as web site design and web site/email hosting, e-commerce, anti-virus, mobile personal information management and anti-spam. The Nashua Mobile Internet services are available from Nashua Mobile outlets countrywide.

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