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Devices: confusing the user

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Mobile device management is now so high profile that, as we have reported recently, an entire industry organisation has grown up around it. And among the many aspects of device sophistication that exercises the industry, one of the most important is configuration. The drive towards newer and better services will mean little if end users don't care for the effort involved in enabling their handsets to carry them out.

And yet a new study from WDSGlobal, a major player in MDM, has found that nearly half of all technical support calls taken by mobile operators relate solely to handset configuration. This makes failed access to data services such as email, WAP and MMS one of the most time-consuming and costly support issues faced by the mobile industry today, says the company.

By why are we still unable to simplify handset configuration? Today, says Tim Deluca-Smith, WDSGlobal's vice president of marketing, the issue is less about the device and more about shifts in consumer behaviour and service type. To put this in context he offers two examples. Firstly, he points out, consumers are sourcing devices from outside the operator's retail chain. These could, for instance, be acquired SIM-free from official outlets like expansys.com or the UK's Carphone Warehouse. They could be purchased second-hand and unlocked from internet auctions. They could even be swapped between friends and family. Wherever they come from, these handsets are usually not configured for data services, or contain outdated and possibly inaccurate settings. This means that they are largely confined to voice and SMS until the user makes a call to customer care for a resolution. As Deluca-Smith points out: "That's unacceptable to the operators who are now looking at automatic device detection and configuration to identify devices attached to the network, assess their capabilities and configure them accordingly."

The second point is the one that many of us would have guessed at the outset: the types of service being promoted are more complex. Services like MMS and WAP have 'vanilla' settings - they are usually the same across subscribers within the network. However, says Deluca-Smith, "issues arise when you look at the importance of services such as email and IM. These require very personal settings to be applied - for example user name, SMTP server - that differ between users. You can't preconfigure this type of service." What are the typical customer complaints about configuration? Actually, they may not even bother. As Deluca-Smith reminds us, users only realise that they might have a problem with configuration when a service fails to work. "This may be a result of accidentally deleted settings, outdated settings or the fact that settings didn't exist on the device at all," he says. The problem, at least for the operator, is that in many cases the service in question is not enough of a killer application to prompt the user to find a way to resolve the problem through self-care websites or through the call centre. The upshot? The operator's relationship with that subscriber is likely to be limited to low-margin voice for the remainder of the contract period.

For end users that do seek a resolution, the operator's support centre is usually the first port of call. "In fact," Deluca-Smith says, "47 per cent of technical support calls coming into an operator relate to issues with configuration."

Clearly, then, configuration is a real and continuing problem, albeit easily summarised: it's simply too complex. "This is certainly true of mobile email set-up where both operator and email service provider information is required," Deluca-Smith points out. "Mobile email is being touted as the natural successor to SMS - but for the consumer, without IT departments managing the service, set-up is too complex."

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