

Communications for SMBs

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Enterprise mobility used to be a luxury confined to the realm of the large enterprise and not small- to medium-sized business (SMBs). These were the companies that could afford to run an IT team dedicated to desperately working around the clock to keep control of all the mobile gadgets being used on the network. However, recent innovations from communications companies are helping to swing the balance back towards meeting the needs of SMBs.

One company aiming to provide SMB-focused solutions is i-mate. The three year old firm's mission is to enable companies to tailor and manage Microsoft Windows Mobile devices and applications. To facilitate this claim it launched the i-mate suite at this year's 3GSM. This packaged solution means organisations with requirements for as few as 50 mobile devices can now afford to take the use of their network and resources outside the office.

i-mate can customise any device that is shipped with Microsoft Windows Mobile, from a businesses logo and branding colour scheme, to its security policy and fully controlled access to the company network. Over the past three years, this has been a classic example of the type of function that has been more commonly approached by larger enterprises. Yet, smaller companies can now get customised and simple to manage mobile workforces on the go as well.

Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) should "love" i-mate suite, says John Williamson, director of special projects at iMate: "This is very relevant to SMEs. What we're doing is allowing people to have group working functionality and tools and capabilities straight out of the box, so helping them get more out of the device. SMEs can take on the benefits...very quickly."

i-mate suite is the culmination of the last 18 months work at i-mate who looked into the issues that arise in the enterprise in terms of getting mobile devices into the organisation, and working out how to smooth these issues out to ease the IT manager's job.

Security was one issue that the company focused on. Williamson adds: "All companies have an anti virus policy. We wanted to be inclusive with that, so that [devices] would work into that policy easily. To start with, Windows Mobile Devices have the Microsoft virtual private network client built in. Additionally, while many people do use Microsoft VPN clients, people may also use third party VPN and security

clients. To fulfil those clients' needs, we can customise and create special builds for our devices specifically for that company."

Another area the company studied was what a company actually wants to be able to do with its mobile devices. This sounds like a seemingly obvious route to take in product development but perhaps it is so blindingly obvious, too few businesses actually try it out. i-mate discovered, not to its great surprise that email was the most requested choice.

Williamson comments: "Companies with a Microsoft Exchange Server can get push email for free on Microsoft Windows Mobile devices. For companies without an Exchange Server, we [have a hosted] exchange dedicated to mobile users outside of the US. This means every i-mate device we sell has a free Microsoft Exchange email account so users don't need to buy in a special infrastructure."

However, Williamson adds that supporting Microsoft Exchange is essential in the SMB space: "SMEs have used Microsoft Exchange and push email through their devices, and decided it is beneficial for their organisation. They've then gone out and bought Exchange Server from Microsoft, and hopefully, more i-mate devices to go along with it," he says.

Management of these devices is a key consideration for SME businesses, Williamson says. Yet up until recently, many SMEs have not paid adequate attention to this factor of getting their organisation mobile. "SMEs want to manage their devices far more effectively," Williamson says. "This is what i-mate suite does as well, by enabling companies to manage these devices remotely."

Within i-mate suite are three modules that provide a wrap across security, data and management of a mobile network. The first module is 1-View; essentially, this is a file sharing utility provides access and sharing capability to a businesses' network.

Says Williamson: "You can use it to access files stored on a Windows PC or at the office from wherever you are so you don't need a massive memory on your mobile device, as you can just download what you need. For IT administration, you can also use 1-View to give users access to certain areas, for group working and collaboration, such as file sharing in a Windows environment."

i-mate Control is the second module in i-mate suite, which gives you the ability to perform remote updates, configuration, trouble shooting and tailoring of devices. Williamson comments: "This is designed to make jobs easier in terms of end user support and for administrators. If a

handset won't work or the settings on the device are wrong, the administrator can go in remotely to make it work by pushing updates and customisation out to the device. The administrator can also use i-mate Control to lock and erase a device if it gets lost. We can even make a device scream out 'Help! I'm lost!'. This was developed in response to demand from corporates, to help them manage the devices in their space."

i-mate Backup is a nifty piece of work that aids SMEs in using specific backup policies on their mobile workforce's devices. Again, Williamson lays out the features: "Backup is very important for these devices. They are getting more powerful as businesses store more information on them. With i-mate Backup, you can do incremental backups over the cellular network or bigger backups over WiFi networks or full backups when the device is connected directly to a PC. The administrator can decide when to do a backup, and can also use this module to system restore."

i-mate is working towards a backup system on i-mate suite that only requires the use of a single log on and password. Currently, the complexity comes in as different areas are backed up and stored in different places; email is backed up to Microsoft's Exchange Server, while all settings that have been installed are backed up on i-mate Backup within the i-mate suite. So users will need to double up on login and passwords for the time being, Williamson apologises.

And i-mate's devices have been designed with simplicity as the focus, from the high end devices for corporates, down to the introduction lately of devices more suited to smaller budgets.

Williamson adds that one of the advantages of using an i-mate device is that no new ways of working are required. The devices are based on Windows, so SMEs simply need to carry on working as they have been on the office PC.

There's no point in you or any SME buying high-end devices that are very complex and basically hard to use, more or less defeating the object of their purchase. You should insist on mobile technology that offers robust functionality whilst still be easy to use. Choose your supplier well.