



Comment: Lamp posts may be the key to low-cost metropolitan telephony

Deployment of Wi-Fi and WiMax metropolitan networks could pave the way for a new breed of telephony services, argues Richard Bennett, corporate development officer at global VoIP company Coms.

Internet telephony, often called Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), has recently made great strides into the PSTN (public switched telephone network) market. There is no doubt that a new industry segment - voice over wireless local area networks (VoWLAN) - is coming and that low-cost Internet telephony will threaten the revenues of mobile operators.

Already, anyone with a suitably equipped computer that is connected to the Internet, or a home phone connected via a terminal adapter, can make low-cost calls. In fact, any authorised Wi-Fi hotspot, be it at home, at the office or at a coffee shop, can be used to make VoIP calls.

The future is linking Wi-Fi hotspots into a metropolitan wireless network, thus creating a virtual mobile phone network. Norwich has done just that. Residents in range of the city's wireless metropolitan network can, and do, make and receive low-cost Internet telephone calls when logged on to their home Wi-Fi network. If they go beyond the range of the metropolitan network, or WoLAN, then the advanced wireless handsets continue the call on a mobile (GSM/3G) network.

It is therefore plausible to consider that, very soon, people will no longer need to have a landline as well as a mobile phone contract. One personal telephone number can be assigned to a VoIP enabled device (in the case of Norwich the prefix would be: 01263). As this number is network agnostic, convergence of landline, mobile and Internet is literally on the doorstep.

The phones earmarked to set VoIP alight are on the way to the UK. Leading phone manufacturers are introducing a plethora of wireless Internet phones compatible with metropolitan wireless networks.



These phones will enable the user to make telephone calls like they would with a mobile phone. When it connects to the Internet significantly lower call costs are incurred. Perhaps most importantly, these devices look and feel like traditional cordless home phones and mobile handsets. It is this familiarity that will aid the take up of VoIP - even amongst the less technically savvy.

For VoWLAN to work, there needs to be the necessary infrastructure. Numerous small companies, such as Loose Connections in my home City of Brighton, provide free access services. Or, for a small fee I can connect to commercial services provided by operators such as The Cloud. At present coverage is sporadic in this infant sector. However, initiatives from city councils in 2007 could be about to change all that.

Curiously, many local councils will be outsourcing their street lighting as part of the Government's private finance initiatives. Lamp posts are conveniently spaced out through cities. They have a power supply and sufficient height to make them perfect mounting locations for Wi-Fi aeriels. Mesh all these lamp posts together and it would be possible to create a wireless metropolitan or WiMAX network.

This has not escaped the attention of PFI operators such as Skanska that are bidding for these street lighting projects and are including wireless metropolitan networks and Internet telephony in their proposals.

2007 is going to be full of interest and speculation into the privatisation of council assets lamp posts, WiMAX developments and convergence of billing and network selection. I can't wait!

About Richard Bennett

Richard Bennett is the corporate development officer of Coms plc. Coms has been established to provide global Internet telephony services and listed on the London AIM market in 2006 (LSE:COMS). Previously, Richard was a co-founder of J2/JFAX which is the world's largest unified messaging service provider and is now listed on the NASDAQ market and a founder of Green Riband Capital Limited.

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