IDC ANALYST CONNECTION

Nolan Greene
Research Analyst, Network Infrastructure

How Your Small to Midsize Business Can Embrace Mobility Now

August 2015

Mobile devices have brought advancements to virtually all aspects of modern life and have had transformative effects on businesses spanning all industries. However, the positive business effects that can be brought about by mobility and "going digital" are not enjoyed as frequently within small and midsize businesses (SMBs) as they are within larger organizations. While potential benefits are there, small and midmarket organizations may have fewer resources available and can find difficulty in realizing the full value of the enterprise mobility infrastructure. Often, organizations find themselves having to make trade-offs between richness of functionality and available resources.

The following questions were posed by Cisco to Nolan Greene, research analyst with IDC's Network Infrastructure group, on behalf of Cisco's SMB customers.

Q.   What is happening in the industry that is impacting the mobility needs of SMBs?

A.   Broadly speaking, the same factors that have led to the proliferation of enterprise mobility in larger organizations are also playing out for small and midsize businesses. Public cloud applications promise greater efficiencies in day-to-day operations, employees want to use personal devices for work, and SMBs are seeing the potential to derive real value from mobile customer engagement.

This is a far cry from when SMBs — outside of a few key vertical industries like banking and finance — were viewed as lacking the need or sophistication required to run a scaled-out mobility infrastructure. Since the advent of Apple's iPhone and bring your own device (BYOD), the narrative around SMB mobility has changed. Thus many of the same challenges that larger enterprises were facing are now being faced by smaller organizations.

However, there is a dearth of solutions that are tailored to the needs of SMB mobility management — and this is perhaps exacerbated by the emergence of the 802.11ac standard in smaller organizations.

Q.   What are the current challenges for SMBs?

A.   BYOD remains a challenge for smaller organizations. As mentioned, there is not as well developed an ecosystem of mobility management solutions for SMBs as there is for larger organizations. BYOD brings about new security and policy challenges — devices can be infected off-premises and carry potentially harmful malware onto the business network. Also, personal devices can be used for nonbusiness applications that may divert valuable bandwidth away from mission-critical applications. And the risks associated with BYOD have the potential

to do more harm to a smaller organization that may not have the same financial and IT support resources to devote to the inevitable hiccups that occur with a new BYOD program (or unsanctioned BYOD use).

IDC believes that the promise of mobility-enabled cloud applications for SMBs shows greater potential benefits than risks. However, realizing this is contingent upon an enterprise-grade wireless mobility management architecture that includes granular security and policy setting, device visibility, and MDM. Many solutions on the market today could be used effectively in an SMB environment but are often too complex, too expensive, and not easily manageable — especially for organizations with little or no dedicated IT personnel. Thus many SMBs do not go beyond installing basic wireless connectivity, often through consumer-grade infrastructure. A lack of full-blown enterprise-grade security can result in SMBs being the target of network predators.

There are other challenges for smaller organizations, including smaller budgets and limited IT staffing. As mentioned, many enterprise mobility infrastructure solutions are not built for the specific needs of small and midsize organizations. The solutions available may be too complex and too expensive and are not easily manageable. These factors, in sum, may also lend vulnerability to security breaches as policy and security management may be disparate.

Q.   What wireless solutions are on the forefront that will address these needs?

A.   There has been a lot of hype, and for good reason, around cloud-based delivery models for WiFi. With WLAN management and control hosted in a public or private cloud, an organization or their service provider can centrally provision and configure APs, install them in an SMB location, plug, play, and be up and running in little time. Any troubleshooting or updating can also be performed from the cloud console. This can address needs around management simplicity, but some organizations prefer the more traditional controller-based model.

This has led to the increased prevalence of WLAN architectures, both physical controller and cloud controller based, that sit in a sweet spot somewhere between "small and home office" and " large enterprise." Every technology that benefits larger organizations can also benefit smaller organizations. This includes 802.11ac —- both Wave 1 and Wave 2 — which will eventually become necessary in the face of the demands of mobility, cloud, collaboration, and IoT. And these solutions must extend beyond wireless APs. Wave 2 has some potentially expensive cabling and switching implications for SMBs.

Therefore, the wise networking vendor will offer an end-to-end solution that extends from the wiring closet to the end-user device. This includes offering solutions to leverage wireless applications on user devices for a transformation to digital business and enabling small and midsize organizations to extract the maximum benefit from 802.11ac Wave 2.

Q.   What are the requirements from both a technology and a business perspective needed for SMBs to drive this shift to digital business?

A.   As "digital business" becomes a necessary competitive paradigm, SMBs will need to be prepared to shift elements of their IT infrastructure as well as long-standing ways of thinking. From the technology perspective, it has already been said that network infrastructure and management tools must have enterprise-grade feature sets that are accessible in terms of SMB managers' time availability and budgets.

From the business perspective, decision makers have to do more than simply pay lip service to a "digital transformation" —- there must be dedicated financial resources and personnel to develop the platforms and applications necessary to support an SMB that uses the Web and

©2015 IDC

mobility strategically. These platforms and applications include tools for integrating physical and Web presences, as well as beacons and location-based services (LBS). The transformation to a digital experience promotes better customer experience and engagement, providing tools to compete against much larger organizations.

Q.   How will the benefits of going digital impact the business future of SMBs?

A.   Going digital will be an important tool in allowing SMBs to compete effectively with larger organizations that can quickly scale up digital platforms to improve operational efficiencies and better engage employees and customers. SMBs that look to compete only in the physical realm will struggle to stay relevant. Those that are nimble and calculated in moving to a network-enabled competitive paradigm should see an advantage over direct competitors. As mentioned, moving to cloud-based platforms can lead to cost savings and make it easier for different portions of the IT infrastructure to scale as SMBs grow. All the while, the IT infrastructure is simplified without giving up performance.

Also, digital engagement of customers through tool such as wireless location-based services provide new pathways for improving the customer experience through targeted communications that can engender greater customer loyalty. Furthermore, going digital helps attract and retain the talent of the "mobile generation," an emerging group of workers who prefer to use mobile devices to accomplish everyday tasks, and will evaluate job offers based on their ability to do this. Overall, the modern, mobile, SMB wireless network creates new efficiencies that save time, reduce waste, and have a positive effect on the bottom line.

A B O U T   T H I S   A N A L Y S T

Nolan Greene is a research analyst with IDC's Network Infrastructure group covering Enterprise Networks. In this role, he is responsible for market and technology trends, forecasts, and competitive analysis in the Ethernet switching, routing, wireless LAN, and adjacent networking markets. While contributing to quarterly and yearly forecast and market share updates, he also assists in survey design and end-user interviews and contributes to custom projects for IDC's Consulting and Go-To-Market Services practices.