



# MOVE W

# WITH THE TIMES

The mobile working marketing machine is everywhere. But is this phenomenon quite the explosion everyone says it is? Chris Allsop reports.

One of the worst aspects of mobile working/home working/remote working/FreE-Working/teleworking is the lack of ownership of this phenomenon which means people can call it pretty much whatever they want. Having discarded 'Orbiting office units' and 'Distance workers', I'm thinking of calling the subjects of our study, 'Roamer/homers'. Maybe it'll get picked up and I'll own a small piece of the zeitgeist forever...

Time will tell, and with that in mind we're now about a year on since a lot of manufacturers presented the press with irrefutable evidence and arguments that the big roamer/homer boom was about to happen. So has it? Is this sales territory expanding by a million people per minute? Or is it all an over-hyped damp squib?

One of the prime difficulties with establishing the truth is the variety of terms and what they mean. Karen Stacey, Acco's European product manager for Mobility, offers this definition of 'mobile work': "A combination of technology, workplace organisation, work facilities and support systems allowing people to work in a mobile way, in multiple locations, at any time, to suit their work processes and work-life balance needs".

Brother's Insynergi marcoms manager, Martin Boffey, simplifies the matter further, "Brother defines the mobile worker as having an ubiquitous office – you can work anywhere there is an internet connection".

With the proliferation of broadband and higher bandwidth in the UK, the conditions are certainly set for the mobile worker to flourish. And according to Acco, they are.

"'Mobility' has become a product category in its own right and is rising in prominence in customer catalogues," says Stacey. "Interestingly, the UK is ahead of the game in mobile working, far in advance of our European cousins."

A possible reason she gives for this statistic could be the high cost of office space in the UK, which ranked second only to Japan in a 2002 global survey. With business people spending an increasing amount of time outside the office, their unoccupied desk space is proving an expensive indulgence.

"Technology and lifestyle trends are adding to the momentum, as work becomes less a place we go to, more how we use our time," Stacey adds.

Andy Dunkley, MD, DBE Products, provides a statistical argument to support the idea of a 'mobile working revolution'.

"In total there are 5.5 million people in the UK who now work from home or other external locations, either full time or for a large part of their working time," he says. "This has grown from 3.2 million in 1997 – an increase of 72%. From 1997 to 2001 there was an increase of 900,000 but from 2001 to 2005 the increase was 1.4 million. We would expect this trend to continue."

So who are these lucky people being given the opportunity to work in their slippers, or to relocate into the garden on a sunny day? Of course, there are many self-employed people working from home, but Dunkley points out that an increasing number of professionals and managers are taking up this option.

"The type of business sectors actively encouraging these members of staff to work from home include banking, insurance, financial services, telecoms, energy and pharmaceuticals, and many more besides," he says. "These are likely to be larger business, but could also include the local government, councils, and other public sector bodies, especially in cities where staff commute for a proportionately large part of their day. Dealers should be selling to the larger businesses in their area – but probably targeting different personnel within that business e.g. MDs, sales directors, HR."

Even if you cannot get hold of the top decision makers, Acco's Stacey recommends targeting any mobile and home office workers you can, whether or not they are directly involved in the buying decision.

"Never underestimate the awareness-generating potential of people who may not actually sign the purchase order or raise the cheque," she advises. "Their opinion is nevertheless often crucial."

What do mobile workers want from a product? Boffey says that they require products that allow them to do their job effectively and, if remote, to give them access to their company files and data. Ideally they will also need something that suits their environment and space requirements.

"From the printer, all-in-one and fax arena, wireless printing is proving popular with home workers as it provides them with the flexibility to work from a laptop anywhere in the home," he says. "They also enjoy the freedom and space a cable-free environment offers."

Stacey acknowledges that for those working from home, space will invariably be tight, so equipment must be compact with a small footprint. It must also be stylish and look good in any environment, from traditional to ultra modern, as frequently home workers will be set up to work permanently from their own homes. Stacey adds that people are ready and willing to pay a premium for the equipment that fits these parameters – music to a salesperson's ears. >>



Dunkley points out that the same applies to the furniture as well as the machines and other office products.

"It's unlikely, for example, that they will want a pine desk imposed on them if the remainder of their home has mahogany effect furniture," he says. "It's not uncommon therefore for the company to provide the home worker with an allowance for their furniture so that they can make their own selection."

The main issue Dunkley says that his team at DBE are currently trying to address is to show dealers that the market for home worker furniture has changed and that they need to re-consider their product offering.

"The current range stocked by most is set in the traditional office environment – big desks, big cabinets, needing someone to fit and assemble it, or supplied ready assembled. This is totally inappropriate for the home office market," says Dunkley. "Home workers are already used to self assembly furniture – they're already being supplied through the likes of IKEA and MFI – so unless dealers reflect these changes in their product selection and offering they will continue to miss out on what is a lucrative market for them in terms of sales and profitability."

Looking at the available evidence, we seem to be at the beginning of the mobile/home working boom. Its benefits for companies (less space –

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lower rental costs, for example) and on a larger scale (environmental savings on fewer commuter cars) mean that as the world goes greener and wireless technologies and products get more sophisticated, the boom will only continue.

"The use of wireless products both in the home and on the road will continue to gain pace as more people embrace these technologies," says Boffey. "The dramatic sales of wireless routers bundled with network interface cards in the early part of this year, coupled with the reduction in average selling prices of around £50 for this technology, will no doubt further the demand for wireless hardware devices."

Acco predicts that this year alone the mobility market will grow by more than 10% - an estimate that it says could well be conservative. According to a recent report, professionals are spending an increasing proportion of time outside the office, from 25% of working hours in 2004 to an anticipated 42% by 2007.

It is also estimated that the global mobile workforce will increase from more than 650 million in 2004 to more than 850 million by 2009 – that's more than a quarter of the workforce worldwide.

As Stacey says, there is no question that the market is here to stay – technology and lifestyle choices will see to that. ■